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The saint MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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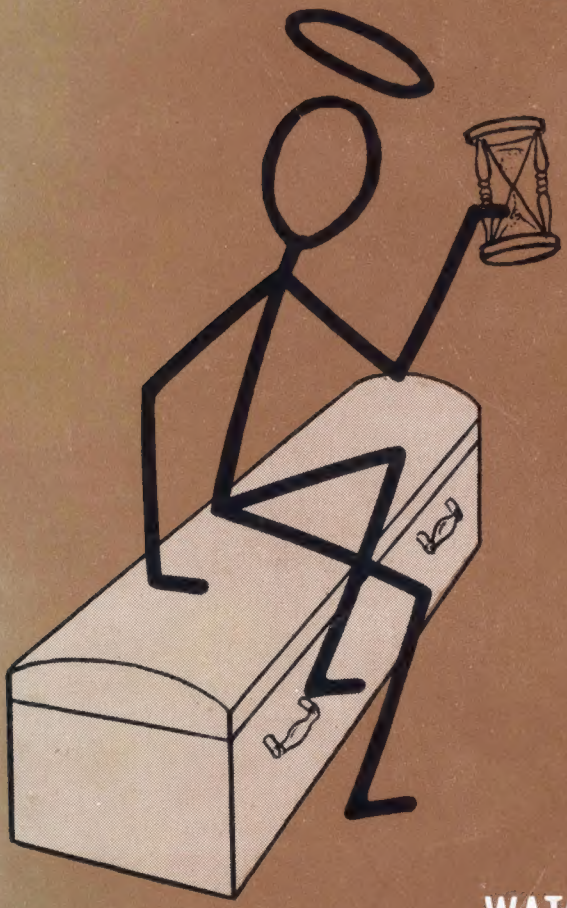

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SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

"The short story is surely the most intractable of prose forms. Few authors can write one well; yet anything less than brilliance is worthless. A mediocre novel can at least be a tolerable companion; a mediocre short story is merely a bore. But a writer who masters the form hears only the faintest of applause; his publisher wants to know when he is going to turn out a novel. Collections of short stories once helped launch such writers as Hemingway and Katherine Anne Porter, but these days short stories are worth little in royalties and less in prestige."

Thus spoke *TIME* Magazine in prefacing a review last fall, echoing to its larger audience a theme which I have been proclaiming and reiterating since before *TIME* began.

In order to take the lead again, I shall now venture a theory to account for the modern down-grading of the short story, which has not only afflicted book collections but has caused the disappearance of whole racks of weekly and monthly magazines which were once regular guests in every civilized household, which offered writers from O Henry to myself galleries in which to exhibit their art and gave many of us a living without which authorship could only have been a part-time hobby, which have been one by one starved off the market by the public's irresistible apathy to what they were selling.

I believe that the phenomenon may be simply one among many facets of a current herd compulsion towards pure size as a criterion and status-symbol of progress.

Robert Fulton's steamboat was dwarfed by progressively more leviathan liners, just as the first commercial airplanes have been superseded by more and more gigantic jets. Office building and hotels became taller and more immense with each demolition and reconstruction; while the American automobile industry sets the pace for the world not only in quantity production but in each manufacturer's ambitition to make a more huge and unwieldly vehicle than his competitor, a trend only briefly interrupted by the "compact" cars which are now busily racing among themselves to be the biggest "compact".

To parallel these structural hypertrophies, not only have cinema screens quadrupled in size, but productions which would once have been thought great for ninety minutes now have no chance of being considered important unless they run for three or four hours. Like a child aping its elders, television is scampering to keep up: the one-time standard half-hour show has become insignificant, the hour show is solid, the ninety-minute show has already debuted, and the two-hour show is probably only a season away. Even full-length novels have tried to outgrow *Gone With the Wind* until nothing short of a hurricane could carry them off, and book club selections seem to be based on tonnage rather than talent.

While this monstrous tide is still flooding, the only consolation for those who prefer quality to quantity (such as readers of this Magazine) must be to think hopefully of the dinosaurs, whose evolution similarly seemed to have hugeness as its main objective. And you know what happened to them.

Leon Charles

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the latin touch

by Leslie Charteris

THE CITY of Rome, according to legend, is built upon the spot where the twin sons of Mars, Romulus and Remus (out of a Vestal who must have been somewhat less than virgin) were suckled by a maternally-minded she-wolf. And there were bitter men in the police departments of many countries who would have said that that made it a very appropriate city for Simon Templar to gravitate into, even today.

But they would have been thinking of him as a wolf in terms of his predatory reputation, rather than in the more innocuous modern connotation of an eye for a pretty girl. He had both, it is true—but it was as a lone wolf in the wastelands of crime that his rather sensational publicity had mostly featured him.

Simon Templar himself would have said with an impish twinkle that his affinity for Rome would be better attributed to the traditional association of the place as a holy city—for who could more aptly visit there than one who was best known by the

THERE WERE STILL TYRANTS IN THE CITY OF NERO WHOSE RULE WAS JUST AS RUTHLESS AND ARBITRARY AS HIS. BUT NERO NEVER HAD TO DEAL WITH THIS KIND OF SAINT.

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nickname of "The Saint"?

It troubled him not at all that the incongruity of that sobriquet was a perpetual irritant to the officers of the Law who from time to time had been called upon to try and cope with his forays. To revert to the wolf simile it was enough for him that even his worst enemies had to concede that the sheep who had felt his fangs had always been black sheep.

But that morning, as he stood on the entirely modern sidewalk outside the ancient Colosseum, his interests were only those of the most ordinary sightseer. Any vulpine instinct he may have had were of the entirely modern kind just referred to—the kind which produces formalized whistles at the sight of a modern Vestal, virtuous or not.

The Saint was too well-mannered for such crude compliments but the girl he was watching could have been no stranger to them. From the top of her close-cropped curly golden head, down through her slim shapely figure and long slender legs to her thoroughbred ankles, she was fresh clean young America incarnate, the new type of goddess that can swim and ride and play tennis and laugh like a boy, to the horror of the conservatives on old Olympus.

Also, as happens all too seldom in real life, she was most providentially in trouble. Providentially from the point of view of any healthy footloose cavalier, that is. She was engaged in a losing argument with the driver of the carriage from which she had just alighted, a beetle-browed individual with all the assurance of a jovial brigand.

"But I made the same trip yesterday," she was protesting indignantly, "and it was only two hundred lire!"

"One t'ousand lire," insisted the driver. "You give-a-me one t'ousand lire, please, *signora.* Dat-a da right-a fare."

It was all the opening that Simon could have asked.

He strolled up beside the girl.

"Where did you take him from?" he asked.

A pair of level gray eyes sized him up and accepted him gratefully.

"From the Excelsior."

Simon turned to the driver.

"*Scusami,*" he said pleasantly, "*ma lei scherza?* The fare cannot be one thousand lire."

"*Mille lire,*" said the driver obdurately. "It is the legal fare." He waved his whip in the direction of three or four other unemployed *carrozze* parked expectantly in the shade of the Arch of Constantine. "Ask any other driver," he suggested boldly.

"I prefer a more impartial witness," said the Saint with imperturable good humor.

He reached out for the blanket that was neatly draped over the seat beside the driver and flipped it back with a slight flourish. It disclosed a conventional taxi-meter which would have been in plain sight of the passenger seat if the blanket had not been so carefully arranged to hide it. Simon's pointing finger drew the girl's eyes to the figures on it.

"One hundred and ninety lire," he said. "I'd give him exactly that and forget the tip. It may teach him a lesson—although I doubt it."

The coachman's unblushing expostulations, accompanied by some scandalous reflections on their ancestry and probable relationship, followed them as the Saint drew her tactfully through the arches and out of earshot.

"All the carriages in Rome have meters, just like a taxi," he explained easily. "But there isn't one of them that doesn't have a blanket artistically draped over it, so that you'd never think it was there unless you knew about it. The driver can't lose and with the average tourist he usually wins. It's brought the country almost as many dollars as the Marshall Plan."

"I'm the original innocent," she said ruefully. "This is my first trip abroad. Do you live here? You speak Italian as if you did."

"No, but I've been around."

A seedy-looking character wearing the typical emblem of his fraternity, a two-day growth of beard, sidled up to them.

"You want a guide?" he suggested. "I tell you all about the Colosseum. This is where they had the circus. Lions and Christians."

"I know all about it," said the Saint. "In a previous incarnation I was Nero's favorite clown. My name was Emmetus Kellius. Everybody used to laugh themselves sick when the lions bit me. So did I. I was smeared all over with hot mustard. Unfortunately, though, I was colorblind. One day, just for a laugh, Poppaea changed the mustard in my make-up pot for ketchup. Everyone said I gave the funniest performance of my life. It even killed me. However . . ."

The would-be guide stared at him disgustedly and went away.

The girl tried to stop giggling.

"Do you really know anything about it?" she asked. "It makes me wish I'd paid more attention to Latin when I was in school. But I never got much beyond *Omnia Gallia in tres partes divisa est.*"

"'De Gaulle is divided in three parties,'" he translated brightly. "I wonder if our State Department knows about that."

She shot him a sudden sharp glance which he did not understand at the time. It made him

think that he was overdoing the flippancy and he didn't want to spoil such a Heaven-sent beginning.

He said, gazing across the arena, "I don't care about knowing a lot of dull statistics. I just try to imagine it as it was before it began to fall apart. Those tiers with nothing but seats like rows of steps, right up to the top. The bleachers, full of excited bloodthirsty people. The arena baking in the same sun that's on it now."

"It's so much smaller than I thought it would be."

"It's bigger than it looks. You could not put a football field in the middle and have plenty of room to run around."

"But the bottom—it's all cut-up into sort of dungeons."

"They probably were. Locker rooms for the gladiators, cells for the Christians, dens for the wild beasts. They must have been roofed over with planks that rotted away long ago—which made the floor of the arena, with a layer of sand on top for easy cleaning. I expect you could hear everything that went on—from underneath. Until your turn was called. I wonder how many people have come up blinking into this same sunlight that we're seeing—and these stones were the last thing they ever saw?"

She shuddered. "You make it seem much too real."

But there were no holiday crowds filling the amphitheatre then. Just a handful of wandering tourists, a few self-appointed guides loafing in hopes of a generous audience, a few peddlers with trays of mass-produced cameos. Simon Templar was hardly aware of any of them. He was wholly enjoying the company of the refreshingly lovely girl a buccaneer's luck had thrown into his life.

That is why he was completely astounded to realize, in the split second of pain and coruscating lights before unconsciousness rolled over him, that someone had come up behind and hit him on the head.

He had to repeat the steps of realization laboriously as the blackness slowly dissolved again. His first impression was that he had simply passed out and he thought hazily of sunstroke. But he couldn't believe that a little sun could do that to him. Then, as a focal point in his skull began to assert itself with painful throbbing, that last instant of awareness came back to him in a flash. He struggled up and opened his eyes.

He was not on the ground but on a wooden bunk that was almost as hard. There was stone around him—but not the moldering stones of the Colosseum. These were modern blocks, trimly mortised. A door made of iron

bars. And the only evidence of sun was a little light that came through a barred window high above his head.

He could not recall exactly when he had last looked at his Gruen, but it told him that at least two hours must have passed since he was talking to a delightful young blonde whose name he had not even learned. If he needed anything more than the ache in his head to attest the efficacy of the blow he had taken the measurement was there on the dial.

He felt his pockets, thinking stupidly of robbery. They were empty. Robbery might have had something to do with it but it would not account for the stone walls and the bars.

He was in jail. He began to wonder what for.

He dragged himself to his feet, mastering a desire to vomit, and stumbled to the door. Holding on to the bars, he called out, "*Hey!* Hullo there!"

It reminded him idiotically of an arty play he had once seen.

Ponderous footsteps clumped deliberately along the passage, and a turnkey came in sight. The uniform clinched any lingering doubt about the jail.

"What am I doing here? Simon demanded in Italian.

The man surveyed him unfeelingly.

"*Aspette,*" he said and went away again.

Simon sat down on the hard cot and held his head in his hands, fighting to clear the cobwebs out of it.

Presently there were footsteps again, brisker and more numerous. Simon looked up and found the jailer unlocking the door.

It opened to admit a small delegation. First, in a kind of inverted order of precedence, came a burly police sergeant in uniform. After him came a superior officer in plain clothes, who was slight and rather dapper, but just as obvious a police type in European terms. Those two the Saint might have expected, if he had thought about it, no matter why he was where he was. But it was the third man, for whom they made way only after they had apparently satisfied themselves that the Saint's attitude was not violent, who was the stopper.

He was a tall iron-gray man with a scholarly stoop, most formally dressed in swallow-tail coat and striped trousers, even carrying white gloves and a silk hat; and Simon recognized him at once. Several million other people would have made the same startled recognition, for Mr. Hudson Inverest was not exactly an international nonentity.

"Well," said the Saint somewhat incredulously, "this is certainly a new high in service. I know the Secretary of State is

technically responsible for people who get themselves in trouble abroad but I didn't expect you to bail me out in person."

"You know who I am? Inverest said matter-of-factly.

The Saint smiled.

"I've seen you in enough news pictures, caricatures—and television. Now I remember reading about you being here on an official visit. It's really very thoughtful of you to be around just at this moment."

The Secretary stared at him grimly over the top of his glasses.

"Mr. Templar, what do you know about my daughter?"

Simon Templar's eyebrows rose a little and drew together.

"Your daughter? I didn't even know you had one."

The uniformed sergeant started a threatening gesture but the plain-clothesman checked it with an almost imperceptible movement of his hand.

"My daughter, Sue," Inverest said.

"A willowy blonde?" Simon said slowly. "With short curly hair and gray eyes?"

"You were with her at the Colosseum—just before she was kidnapped."

It all clicked in the Saint's recuperating mind with a blind and devastating simplicity—even to a reaction of hers which had puzzled him at the time.

"I was talking to a girl like that," he said. "I'd just made some silly crack about the State Department and I noticed she took it in a rather funny way. But I hadn't the faintest idea who she was. And then I got slugged over the head myself. If there were any witnesses they must have seen that."

"That was seen," said the plain-clothesman. "But it did not explain your presence there."

"I was unable to leave," said the Saint. "I was knocked cold, remember? Do you always arrest any innocent bystander who gets hurt at the scene of a crime?"

"When your pockets were searched for identification," said the plain-clothesman suavely, "it was found out at once who you are. Therefore you were brought here. I am sure that being arrested is not such a new experience for you."

Simon turned to the Secretary.

"Mr. Inverest, I never saw your daughter before in my life. I didn't have the faintest idea who she was. I just happened to meet her outside the Colosseum. She was having an argument with a cab driver who was trying to overcharge her. I helped her out and we went into the place together. We went on talking, naturally. And then I was conked on the head. That's all I know."

"There were two others," said the superior policeman impar-

tially. "After they knocked out Mr. Templar, they grabbed Miss Inverest and rushed her out to a car which was waiting outside. I think, your Excellency, that if you give us a little time alone with Mr. Templar, we may persuade him to tell us who they were and how he arranged to—as you say—put the finger on your daughter."

Inverest waved him down impatiently.

"Mr. Templar is to be released at once."

"Your Excellency must be joking."

"I demand it in the name of the Government of the United States. There is no reasonable charge that can be brought against him."

"But a man of his reputation . . ."

Inverest's level gray eyes, oddly reminiscent of his daughter's, searched the Saint's face over his spectacle rims with the same detached appraisal that the girl had given it.

"Inspector Buono," he said, "Mr. Templar is rumored to have considerable disregard for the law but there are no actual charges of law-breaking pending against him in my country. His notoriety, as I understand it, comes from his reprehensible habit of taking the law into his own hands. But it is well known that he is a relentless enemy of criminals. I cannot think of anyone who would be less likely to have any part of such a crime as this. *O si sic omnes!*"

It was a quaintly professorial and almost pedantic speech, even to the Latin quotation at the end, of the type that frequently made Mr. Inverest an easy butt for the more ribald type of political heckling but his handling of it gave it an austere dignity.

Inspector Buono shrugged helplessly.

They went into an office. The Saint's personal belongings were returned and a paper was drawn up.

"Your Excellency will have to sign this," Buono said, with ill-concealed disapproval. "I have to protect myself. And I hope your Excellency knows what he is doing."

"I accept full responsibility," Inverest said, taking out his pen.

Simon watched the signature with the feeling of being at an international conference.

"You're a really big man, sir," he said with a sincere respect which came strangely from him. "Not many people would be capable of giving a ready-made devil like me his due in a situation like this. Certainly not the average small-time cop."

Buono scowled.

"*Damnant quod non intelligunt,*" Inverest said wryly. "It's part of my job to be some sort of judge of human nature. Be-

sides, I have access to special information. I checked on your record in Washington by telephone while we were waiting for you to come to. I talked to the man who was in charge of the OSS section you worked for during the last war."

"Hamilton?"

"He gave you quite a remarkable reference."

Simon lighted a cigarette. He had almost forgotten the throbbing in his head and his brain was starting to feel normal again.

"I wish I could be of some use to you now," he said sympathetically. " I liked your daughter a lot—if I'd only had the least idea who she was I might have been a little on guard. But there wasn't any reason for me to be suspicious of anyone who came near us. How come she was running around on her own like that, without any kind of protection? Or does that question embarrass Inspector Buono?"

"A special escort was provided for Miss Inverest," Buono said coldly. "But she gave them the slip. Deliberately, I am told."

"There was a young fellow detailed by the Embassy to take her around, too," Inverest said, "and she stood him up. Sue's always been like that. She hates the VIP treatment. Getting away from Secret Service men and all that sort of thing is just like playing hookey from school to her. She says she just wants to get around on her own and see things like any ordinary girl. I can't really blame her. I couldn't be telling her all the time what special danger she might be in."

"Do you have some idea what the special danger might be right now?" Simon asked.

"Unfortunately I do."

Inverest took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. That mechanical movement was the first break in his Spartan self control, the first outward betrayal of the desperate anxiety that must have been eating his insides.

"Does the name Mick Unciello mean anything to you?"

"I read all the crime news," said the Saint with a slight smile. "He was the official executioner of the Midwestern crime syndicate. The FBI finally got the goods on him and he was sentenced to the chair some time ago."

"His final appeal to the Supreme Court was rejected last week."

"The Supreme Court can collect a bouquet from me."

"Now, do you remember the name Tony Unciello?"

"Yes. He was the vice lord in the same syndicate. The FBI didn't do so well with him but they were able to get him deported—I think that was in nineteen forty-eight."

"Mick Unciello, of course, is the younger brother of Tony.

And Tony is here in Italy."

"It begins to figure," said the Saint quietly.

"Nothing can save Mick Unciello's life now except the personal intervention of the President," Inverest said in his dry schoolmasterish voice. "That, of course, is unthinkable. But it may be quite another matter to convince Tony that my influence would not bring it about."

"Is this something more than a fast guess on your part?"

"Oh, yes," said the Secretary wearily. "I've already had a telephone call from a person claiming to be Tony Unciello, and I have no reason to doubt its authenticity. He said that unless Mick Unciello was reprieved, Sue would die too—but more slowly."

Simon Templar drew at his cigarette, holding it with fingers that were almost self consciously steady. The naturally devil-may-care lines of his strong reckless face might never have known laughter. He faced the set-up in all its naked ugliness. A memory of Sue Inverest's gay clean-limbed confident youth slid across his mind, and his stomach curled again momentarily.

Then his eyes went to the sleek Inspector.

"But if it's as open as all that," he said, "why haven't you picked up Tony Unciello?"

"It is not so easy," Buono said stonily. "Unciello has dropped out of sight since several days. You understand, there was nothing against him here, so he is not watched all the time. Now, he cannot be found. We look for him, of course, but it is not a simple matter of going to his apartment. He is hiding."

"And you haven't any idea where to look."

"It is not made easy for us."

"What Inspector Buono isn't saying," Inverest put in, "is that the Unciellos are both members of the Mafia. Tony himself is reputed to be one of the very top men. Perhaps you don't know what a stranglehold that terroristic secret society has on this country.

"Nobody knows how many members there are, but at least three-quarters of the population are scared to death of them. If a man of Unciellos' class wants to disappear, there are thousands who would help to hide him, literally millions who wouldn't betray him if they knew where he was."

The Saint took another long drag at his cigarette. He tilted his head back and exhaled the smoke in a trickle of seemingly inexhaustible duration, watching it with rapt lazy-lidded blue eyes.

"Just the same," he said, "I think I know how to find him."

It was as if he had hit them with a paralysis ray out of some

science-fiction story. Hudson Inverest stiffened where he sat. Inspector Buono made one sharp jerky movement and then froze.

"Do you mean you know more about this than you've told us?" Inverest said.

Simon nodded.

"Funny things happen when you're knocked out," he said. "I was hit on the head, and I went down like a wet rag. But I didn't black out all at once. My eyes must have gone on working for several seconds, like a camera with the shutter left open, before I passed out completely.

"And then, when I first recovered consciousness, I'd forgotten all about what I saw. Now it's suddenly all come back —as if the film had been developed. I know I can find Tony Unciello."

"What did you see?" Buono demanded.

Simon looked him in the eyes.

"I can't tell you."

"I do not understand you, *signor!*"

"What I saw happens to be something that wouldn't be any use at all to anyone else. I'm the only man in the world who could use it. So I shall keep it to myself—until I've found Tony. I don't think it'll take very long."

"That is absurd!" Buono insisted waspishly. "I insist that you tell us how you propose to do this."

The Saint turned to Inverest.

"I will tell you, sir, in private, and let you be the judge. But I'm quite sure you'll agree with me. You see, what I know has some really shocking political complications. If it leaked out, the international repercussions would be bigger than an atom bomb. If you knew what I know, you'd be the first to order me to keep my mouth shut."

Inspector Buono bounced to his feet.

"It is against the law to conceal information about a crime from the police," he said furiously. "This alters everything. I shall refuse to release you!"

Inverest gazed at the Saint intently from under lowered brows.

"He has already been released," he pointed out at length. "Furthermore, as regards anything that has transpired since then I must inform you that Mr. Templar has just been appointed a special attache to the American Embassy, and therefore claims diplomatic immunity." He stood up. "I shall communicate with you later, Inspector, if I decide that Mr. Templar's information should be disclosed. Come, Mr. Templar."

He gestured with his shiny top hat towards the door, and Simon went and opened it.

The Secretary of State stalked out without a backward glance but Simon Templar could not

resist turning to give the baffled Inspector a mocking bow before he followed.

Uniformed guards outside saluted them into a waiting black limousine with CD plates and the Stars & Stripes fluttering from a little mast on the hood. It was the finest exit the Saint had made from any police station; he would treasure the remembrance for the rest of his life—however long that might be.

"The driver is an Italian," Inverest said. "Better wait until we're alone."

Simon nodded, and said nothing more until the door had closed behind them in the office at the Embassy which had been placed at the Secretary's disposal.

"Well, Mr. Templar," Inverest said, dropping his hat and gloves on the desk, "you've placed me in a most peculiar position. Unless you have something extraordinary up your sleeve I might well deserve to be impeached. All that talk of yours about international complications, of course, was arrant nonsense."

"You realized that, did you?"

"I'm not completely naive."

"After what you said about the Mafia," Simon explained, "I couldn't take any chances. Not even in police headquarters. It would only take one tiny leak to blow the whole works. And that would mean goodbye to Sue."

"That's understood," Inverest said brusquely. "I took the risk of backing you up. But what is it that you know?"

Simon took out a cigarette and placed it between his lips. Then he took out his lighter and held it poised.

"Nothing."

He lighted the cigarette.

Hudson Inverest's features seemed to crumple from inside as if he had received a physical blow. He sank slowly into a chair.

"Good God, man," he cried shakily. "What are you saying?"

"I don't know a thing. I haven't a clue. I was knocked cold on the spot and that was the end of it. But," Simon went on quickly, "nobody knows that except you and me."

Inverest clasped his hands together as if to steady them.

"Go on."

"If there's a leak in the police department," said the Saint, "so much the better. It'll make the story that much more convincing when it gets to Tony. But we're not going to gamble on that chance alone. I want you to call in your public relations boys and tell them to see that every newspaper in Rome gets the story. Let 'em be as mysterious as they like, but sell it big.

"Then we'll know for sure that Tony Unciello will hear it. His men already know that they slugged a guy who was with

Sue, but they didn't know who it was. My name'll hit them with a big bang. I think it'll make 'em believe almost anything."

"But if they do believe it," Inverest said, "what good will it do? They'll just shoot you down in the street."

Simon shrugged.

"That's a possibility. But I'm betting on the angle of curiosity. I don't think a man like Unciello could bear never to know what this one thing was that I had on him. So I think he'll want me taken alive."

"Even so," Inverest protested, "if they catch you and take you to him—what would you be able to do?"

"I'll try to think of that when the time comes." Simon stood over the older man, very lean and straight, and something like the strength of a sword invested him. "But it's the only chance we've got of finding your daughter. You've got to let me try it."

The statesman blinked up at him, trying to dispel a ridiculous illusion about a musketeer's feather tossed above that impossibly handsome face.

"It might still cost you your life," he said.

"For a gal like Sue," said the Saint lightly, "I wouldn't call that expensive."

Simon Templar came out of the front gates of the Embassy and stood on the sidewalk for a while, gazing idly up and down the Via Vittorio Veneto, like a man trying to make up his mind where to go. What he wanted was to be sure that anyone who might already be watching for him outside would not be left flatfooted by too sudden a departure.

Presently he walked a few steps to the entrance of the Hotel Excelsior, which was only next door. He paused inside to give the lobby a leisurely survey and at the same time to give the population of the lobby plenty of time to survey him. Then he crossed to the desk.

"Do you have any messages for me?" He added, very clearly. "The name is Templar—Simon Templar."

"Your room number, sir?"

"Six-seventeen."

The porter examined his pigeon-holes.

"No, Mr. Templar."

"Thank you. Where is the cocktail bar?"

"On the left, sir, down the stairs."

That ought to take care of anyone who might be waiting to pick him up at the hotel.

He went down the stairs. The room was filling up, the hour being what it was, but he found a place at the bar and ordered a Dry Sack. He was aware of other people filtering in after him—at least two couples, and a

single man who sat at the far end of the bar and started reading a newspaper.

But Simon paid none of them any direct attention. He watched more carefully to see the bottle taken off the shelf and his drink poured without any legerdemain. After all, he reflected, the Borgias were Italians and any bartender would be a likely candidate for the Mafia.

The general level of conversation, he was pleased to note, was pitched discreetly low.

He said to the bartender, just loudly enough for anyone who cared to overhear, "Tell me, I hear there are two restaurants claiming to be the original Alfredo's—the place that's famous for *fettucini.* Which is the real one?"

The bartender grinned.

"Ah yes, they make much propaganda against each other. But the real one, the old one, is in the Via della Scrofa."

"Then I must have been taken to the imitation last night. Tonight I'll have to try the old original."

"You will have a good dinner."

And that, he thought, should be plenty of help to anyone who picked up the trail late or who wanted to make plans ahead . . .

But nothing was likely to happen in the Excelsior cocktail lounge, which was obviously not adapted to tidy abductions, and the Saint was too impatient to wait there for long. The laughing face of Sue Inverest kept materializing in front of him, turning into a mask of pitiful terror, dissolving into imagined scenes of unspeakable vileness.

He knew the mentality of men like Tony Unciello too well to be complacent about the inevitable passing of time. He wanted *something* to happen fast. He wanted to leave nothing undone that would help it to happen.

He finished his sherry, paid for it and went out into the street again.

A glance at his watch only reasserted the fact that it was still early to go to dinner. He strolled up towards the Borghese Park, making a conscious effort to slow down a stride that wanted to hurry but had no place to hurry to.

The crowded tables of a sidewalk cafe were suddenly on both sides of him. Perhaps there Unciello's men might see an opportunity.

He spotted a vacant table at the edge of the sidewalk, next to the street, where it would be as easy as possible for them. He sat down.

A waiter took his order. A boy came by with an armful of newspapers, and Simon bought one. The kidnapping of Sue Inverest qualified for the biggest headline on the front page, and early in the story he found himself

referred to as a friend of the girl, who had been "beaten and left for dead" on the scene; with a fine disregard for obvious probabilities, which was no more inconsistent than the facts, he was later reported being held by the police for investigation of his possible complicity in the crime.

His drink came, and he paid for it but did not touch it. He extracted a grim kind of satisfaction out of realizing that the chances of any food or drink offered to him being poisoned must be increasing with every minute. He could cope with that danger easily enough, at least for awhile. It was less easy to become accustomed to the crawly feeling that at any instant a knife from nowhere might strike him between the shoulderblades, or a fusillade of shots from a passing car smash him down into bloody oblivion.

But that was what he had asked for—and he was beginning to sympathize with the emotions of a goat that had not merely been staked out to attract a tiger but was cooperating with every resource of capric coquetry to coax the tiger to the bait. And all he could do was hope he was not mistaken in his estimate of Tony Unciello's vein of curosity.

He read on, looking for a reference to the mysterious secret clue he was supposed to have.

And then he had company.

There were two of them and because he had studiously avoided watching for them they might have sprung up out of the ground. They stood one on each side of him, crowding him, at the same time practically blocking him from the sight of the other patrons of the cafe. They were men of perfectly average size and build, dressed in perfectly commonplace dark suits, with perfectly unmemorable faces distinguished only by the perfect expressionlessness of their prototypes in any gangster movie. It was just like home.

The street was behind Simon —but that opening was closed, with admirable timing, by a car which simultaneously slid to the curb and stopped at his back.

One of the men leaned on Simon's shoulder with a hand that was buried in his coat pocket. But what the Saint felt was harder than a hand and he knew that the muzzle of a gun was no more than an inch from his ear.

"Let's go, sport," the man said.

Simon tried to look up with the right combination of fear, surprise and bluster.

"What are you talking about?"

"You, sport,' said the spokesman laconically. "Get in the car."

Simon flicked his cigarette into the gutter, where it was immediately the center of a scramble of vulture-eyed urchins, and stood up. It was the only stir caused by his departure.

In the car the two men sat one on each side of him in the back seat. Each of them kept a hand in the pocket of his coat on the side nearest the Saint, one in the right, one in the left. Their two guns pressed with equal firmness against the neighborhood of the Saint's kidneys. Neither of them offered any conversation. The driver of the car said nothing. He drove in complete silence, like a man who already had his instructions.

There were no shades inside the car, no suggestion of blindfolding the Saint, no attempt to stop him observing the route they took. The implication that nothing he saw would ever be any use to him was too obvious to be missed, but that gave him nothing unforeseen to worry about. He could still hope that the project was to take him to Tony Unciello before the only possible intended end of the ride.

They drove down to the Tiber, crossed over the Ponte Cavour, turned by the Palace of Justice. The great white dome of St. Peter's loomed ahead against the darkening sky and lights played on the fountains in the vast circular piazza in front of the cathedral.

But they left it on their right and skimmed around the walls of the Vatican City to plunge into the maze of mean streets which lies incongruously between it and the pleasant park slopes of Monte Gianicolo. A few zigzags through narrow ill-lit alleys and the car stopped outside a small *pizzeria* and bar with strings of salami tastefully displayed in the dingy and fly-specked window.

"Get out, sport," said the talking man.

His partner got out first and waited for the Saint. The two of them closed in behind Simon and prodded him towards the door of the *pizzeria*. They kept him moving briskly through the odorous interior but it was only to get their job done, not because they cared about anyone in the place.

The drinkers at the bar just inside the entrance, the shirt-sleeved bartender wiping glasses on a filthy rag, the few diners at the stained tables in the back, the slatternly woman who looked out of the open door of the kitchen in the rear, all stared at the Saint silently as he passed—but the stares were as emotionless and impersonal as the stares of zombies.

Next to the kitchen door there was a curtained archway—beyond it a steep flight of stairs. They climbed to a narrow landing with two doors. The man who never spoke opened one of them and pushed the Saint through.

He found himself in a small untidy bedroom, but he hardly had time to glance over it be-

fore the same man was doing something to the big old fashioned wardrobe that caused it to roll noiselessly aside like a huge sliding door.

"Keep moving, sport," said the talkative one and the Saint was shoved on through the opening.

As he stepped into the brightness beyond, as if on to a stage set, he knew that he had at least won the first leg of the double, even before he saw the man who waited for him.

"Hello, Tony," he said.

It was the contrast of the room in which he found himself after the squalor that he had been hustled through which was theatrical. It was spacious and high-ceilinged, exquisitely decorated and furnished, like a room in a set designer's conception of a ducal palace. The Saint's gaze traveled leisurely around it in frank fascination.

From his impression of the street outside he realized that the interiors of several ramshackle old buildings must have been torn out to provide a shell for that luxurious hideaway—a project that only a vast secret society could have undertaken and kept secret. Even the absence of windows was almost unnoticeable, for the indirect lighting was beautifully engineered and the air was fresh and cool.

"Quite a layout you have for such a modest address," Simon remarked approvingly. "And with air-conditioning, yet."

"Sure, it's plenty comfortable," said Tony Unciello.

He sat in an immense brocaded chair, looking like a great gross frog. The resemblance held true for his sloping hairless head, his swarthy skin and heavy-lidded reptilian eyes, his broad stomach and thin splayed legs. In fact, almost the only un-frog-like things about him were his clothes, the diamond rings on his fingers, and the cigar clamped in his thick-lipped mouth.

"So you're the Saint," Unciello said. "Sit down."

Instantly Simon was pushed forward, the seat of an upright chair hit him behind the knees, two hands on his shoulders pushed him forcefully down upon it. His two escorts stood behind him like sentries on guard duty.

The Saint straightened his coat.

"Really, Tony," he murmured, "when you get hospitable, it's just like being caught in a reaper."

The gangster took the cigar out of one side of his mouth and put it back in the other.

"I heard a lot about you, Saint."

"I know. And you just couldn't wait to meet me."

"I could of waited forever to meet you. But now it's different.

All on account of this place." Unicello took the cigar out again to wave it comprehensively at the surroundings. It's quite a layout, like you said. And comfortable, like I said. You ain't seen half of it.

"I could hole up here for years, and live just like the Ritz, Only there's nobody supposed to know about it who don't belong to me, body and soul. And then you come along, and you don't belong to me, but it gives out that you know how to find me."

"Why, what gave you that idea?"

"That's what you said in the paper."

"I'd bought a newspaper just before your reception committee picked me up," Simon remarked thoughtfully, "but it didn't have that story. How did you hear it so quickly? Direct from the police, maybe?"

"You catch on fast," Unicello said. "Sure, Inspector Buono's one of my boys. He should of kept you locked up when he had you, and saved me this trouble."

Simon nodded. He was not greatly surprised.

"I figured him for a stinker," he said. "But it's nice to have you confirm it."

"Buono's a good boy," Unicello said. "He knows where I am. That's okay. But with you it's different." He leaned forward a little. His manner was very patient and earnest. "I like this place. Spent a lot of dough fixing it up. I'd hate that to be all wasted. But when a fellow like you says he could find it, it bothers me. I gotta know how you got it figured. So if maybe somebody slipped up somewhere, it can be taken care of—see what I mean?"

"You couldn't be more lucid, Tony," Simon reassured him. And what do you think this information would be worth?"

Unicello chuckled, a soundless quaking of his wide belly.

"Why, to you it's worth plenty. You tell me all about it, and everything's nice and friendly. But you don't tell me and the boys have to go to work on you. They do a mean job. You hold out for an hour, a day, two days —depending how tough you are. But in the end you talk just the same, only you been hurt plenty first. To a fellow with your brains that don't make sense. So you tell me now and we don't have no nastiness."

Simon appeared to consider this briefly, but the conclusion was obvious.

"You make everything delightfully simple," he said. "So I'll try to do the same. I said I could find you and this proves it. I'm here now."

"Only because my boys brought you here."

"Which I figured you'd have them do as soon as you heard I was claiming to know how to

find you."

Unicello's eyes did not blink so much as deliberately close and open again, like the eyes of a lizard.

"You're a smart fellow. Now you're here. What's your angle?"

"Will one of these goons behind me start shooting if I go for a cigarette?"

"Not if it's just a cigarette."

Simon took one from the pack in his breast pocket, moving slowly and carefully to avoid causing any alarm. In the same way he took out his lighter and kindled it.

"I'm acting as Mr. Inverest's strictly unofficial representative," he said. "As you very well know he can't officially make any deal with you. In fact, for public consumption he's got to say loudly that nobody can blackmail him, even with his daughter's life—or else he'd probably be out of a job and have no influence at all. But as a man, of course, you've got him over a barrel. He's ready to trade."

"He's a smart fellow too."

"It'll have to be very discreetly handled so that it looks kosher. They'll have to arrange to dig up some startling new evidence to give grounds for a re-trial and an acquittal later."

"That's his worry. I don't care how he does it, just so Mick gets out."

"But before he starts to work he's got to be sure that you've really got his daughter and that she hasn't been harmed."

"The gal's okay."

Simon looked at him steadily.

"I have to see her myself. Then I'll write him a note, which you can have delivered. I'll tell you right now that it'll have a code word in it, which is to prove that I really wrote it and that nobody was twisting my arm to make me say the right things."

Unciello contemplated him with the immobility of a Buddha. Then his eyes switched to a point over the Saint's head.

"*Mena la giovane,*" he said.

The hoodlum who never spoke came around from behind the Saint's chair and crossed the big room to disappear through one of the doors at the other end. Unciello smoked his cigar impassively. There was no idle conversation. Presently the man who had left came back, and with him he brought Sue Inverest.

She was so exactly as Simon had seen her last and as he remembered her that for a moment it felt as if they were back in the Colosseum. Only in a strange dislocation of time they now seemed to belong rather with the expendables who had once stood on the floor of the arena, while a modern but no less vicious Nero squatted like a toad on his brocaded throne and held their lives in his hands. But the girl still carried her curly fair

head high and Simon smiled into her shocked gray eyes.

"Your father sent me to see if you were all right, Sue," he said gently. "Have they hurt you?"

She shook her head.

"No, not yet. Are they going to let me go?"

"Quite soon, I hope."

"Write that letter," Unciello said.

The taciturn thug brought a pad and pencil from a side table and thrust them at the Saint.

Simon balanced the pad on his knee and wrote, taking his time—

Dear Mr. Inverest:

I've seen Sue, and she's still as good as new. So you'd better hurry up and meet Tony's terms, even if it isn't exactly "for the public good." Perhaps that would sound better to you in Latin, but it all comes to the homo sequendum. Will report again as arranged.

Simon Templer

He held out the pad. The man who had brought it carried it across to Unciello.

Unciello read it through slowly, and looked up again at the Saint.

"What's that *homo sequendum* deal?" he demanded.

"*Homo* means 'same' as in 'homosexual,' " Simon explained patiently. "*Sequendum* is the same root as our word 'sequel' or 'consequences.' It just means 'the same result.' Inverest goes for that Latin stuff."

Unciello's eyes swiveled up to the girl.

"That's right," she said in a low voice. "He does."

"Guys like you with your education give me a pain," Unciello said. His cold stare was on the Saint again. "And what's that about reporting again?"

"I'm not stupid enough to expect you to turn me loose now," Simon said. "And anyhow, Inverest is going to want another report on Sue—authenticated with our password—from me, before they finally let your brother go."

The gang chieftain held out the pad towards his errand-boy.

"Have somebody downstairs send it," he ordered.

He continued to study the Saint emotionlessly, but with deep curiosity.

"You're a real smart fellow," he said. "But you're taking a lot of chances. What's in it for you?"

Simon raised his eyebrows a fraction of an inch.

"Hudson Inverest is a rich man in his own right," he said. "He's offered a reward of a hundred thousand dollars to anyone who helps get his daughter back. Didn't your pal Buono tell you that? Even he looked interested!"

The messenger returned and resumed his position behind the Saint's chair but Unciello did not even appear to notice him for several seconds. He remained

sunk in an implacable and frightening immobility of meditation. And then at last his saurian eyes flicked up.

"Tell Mario to serve dinner," he said. "We'll all eat together. And send word to Buono I want to see him—*subito.*"

They ate in a palatial dining room that was almost overpoweringly ornate with gilt and frescos, Sue and the Saint on either side of Tony Unciello at the head of a long table. One of the guards stood behind each of the involuntary guests like an attendant footman, but their function was not to serve. They kept their hands in the side pockets of their coats and their eyes on every movement that was made, particularly by the Saint.

The meal, in spite of the lavish surroundings, was only spaghetti though with an excellent sauce. Apparently that was what Unciello liked, for he tackled a huge plate of it with a practically uninterrupted series of engulfing motions, almost inhaling it in a continuous stream. Sue Inverest could only toy with hers but the Saint ate with reasonable appetite, although the grotesque silence, broken only by the clink of silverware and the voracious slurping of the host, would have unnerved most other men.

"Tony doesn't like small talk at meals." Simon tried to encourage her. "But don't let him put you off your feed. You've got to keep in good shape to go home."

Unciello stuffed the last remnants from his plate into his mouth until his cheeks bulged, then washed them down with a draught of Chianti from a Venetian goblet. He wiped his face with the napkin tucked under his chin.

"Now I got it," he announced and the Saint looked at him inquiringly.

Unciello said, "I got that *homo sequendum* business. That's gotta be the password you fixed up with Inverest. It's the only phony-sounding thing in your letter. So now I don't need you any more. I got boys who can copy any handwriting. And with that password, now *they* can write letters to Inverest and tell him his daughter's okay."

"You mean I can go, Tony?" Simon asked hopefully.

"Yeah—to the morgue. You never was going anywhere else because you know too much about this place—like I told you. But now I don't have to keep you around until they let Mick go. I guess you ain't so smart after all."

Simon Templar had no argument. It would have done no good to point out that this was one occasion when he had not figured himself particularly smart so far as his own personal survival was concerned. He felt lucky to have achieved as much

as he had. Even if he were not to live to see the finish he could still hope that the gamble had not been altogether lost. As for himself it had to come some day and this way was as worthwhile as any.

He smiled at the girl's comprehending horror and his eyes were very gay and blue.

"Don't worry, Sue," he said. "Don't think about it, ever. I just hope everything works out all right for you."

"I'l take care of her myself, personally," Unciello said — and only then, for the first time, Simon felt ice in his heart.

The door from the living-room opened abruptly and Inspector Buono came in.

He looked very cool and elegant and if he had any nervousness it might have been found only in his eyes. They merely glanced at the girl and Simon, went quickly back to Unciello.

"*Eccomi arrivato,*" he said obsequiously. "*Cosa desidera?*"

"Talk English," Unciello growled. "The Saint wants to know what's going on. It's his funeral we're talking about. I sent for you because you're just the boy to take charge of it. You got the perfect set-up. You make it look like he was shot resisting arrest. You do it yourself and maybe you can get yourself a medal."

"But—"

"I'm sending a couple of the boys along to watch you." Unciello poured another glass of wine and his broad face was malevolently bland. "I hear some of our people are worried that one of these days you might get too interested in a reward if it was big enough. Now, if they see you do something like this, so they can feel they've got something on you, it'll give 'em a lot more confidence."

"*Si, signor,*" Buono said whitely.

Then the door behind him burst open again and the room suddenly filled with armed police.

Through their midst stepped a large elderly perspiring man with a superb black handlebar moustache, who surveyed the scene with somewhat pompous satisfaction.

"Everyone here," he said, not without a trace of awe, "is under arrest."

The stooped scholarly figure of the Secretary of State followed him in and Sue Inverest flung herself into her father's arms.

Simon Templar prudently reached for the Chianti bottle and refilled his glass.

Most of what Sue Inverest did not know had been told her while the official limousine was still on its way to the Embassy.

"But I still don't know how you got there," she said, "like—

the posse coming over the hill in the last reel of a Western."

"My dear," Mr. Inverest said mildly, "surely even you learned enough Latin in school to know that *homo sequendum* means 'man who must be followed'?"

She gave a shaky half-laugh.

"I might have thought of that, but the Saint was so convincing with his translation . . . And anyway, how did you know *who* to follow?"

"Whom," said Mr. Inverest.

"You remember that tag about 'for the public good'?" Simon said. "I told your father he'd like it better in Latin. That's *pro bono publico.* I could only hope he'd be fast enough to turn the *bono* into *Buono.*"

"Fortunately I'm not quite the imbecile that I'm sometimes called," Inverest said. "Once I had that clue, I went straight to the top. That was the Minister of Interior himself who was in charge of the raid."

"And you remember," Simon added, "how I threw in that bit about Buono's unseemly interest in a reward which he hadn't reported – for the simple reason that it was never offered. I was banking on that to bother Tony enough so that he'd send for Buono, which would lead the posse straight to the right place."

The girl cuddled her father's arm, but her gray eyes were on the Saint. "I know you're not really rich, Daddy," she said, "but he ought to have some reward after all, he risked his life for me."

Simon grinned. "I'll settle for the privilege of buying you a real dinner. And then maybe dancing with you till dawn. And then if there's anything still owing, I'd better leave it on deposit. I'm liable to need it one of these days."

MOBILE THIEF CATCHER

Sneak thieves and other undesirables who've been haunting the Port Authority Bus Terminal here in New York are beginning to take a dim view of a black compact car that seems always to turn up just when they're about to grab the pocketbook or luggage of someone who's fallen asleep, waiting for the three a.m. bus to wherever they are going. At the wheel of the car is a uniformed patrolman of the Port Authority Police. His job is to catch these thieves and pickpockets who operate either on the always crowded departures levels or upstairs on the three parking levels. The car, which travels seventy-five miles a day (there are five miles of roadways, including the ramps to the Lincoln Tunnel, within the block-square terminal) also carries oxygen and first-aid equipment to treat whomever among the tens of thousands passing daily through the terminal may be ill. Particular attention is naturally paid to parked cars with suits and dresses, or luggage, clearly visible from the outside, or to luggage left unwatched, for the moment, by some passenger who has more faith in his fellow man than these officers . . .

the man on the back seat

by Phyllis Bentley

THE 7.16 BUS came up right on time, clean and fresh and neat from its garage for the first run of the day, and stood at the bus stop, throbbing.

The queue began to climb in silently in its usual orderly way. This bus—it was more like a coach, really, a single-decker with high well-cushioned seats—was always rather full because it was a "through." That is, starting on this hillside suburb of the Yorkshire town of Hudley, it went down into the town and up into the hills on the other side to the suburb of High Roebuck, and then right on over the moors and down to Manchester.

This was the reason Betty Potter took this rather early bus, for Betty, a trim, shrewd, bright-eyed young woman, was cashier of the High Roebuck branch of Wadley's stores.

Ken, who got in at Hudley, complained about these through buses; he had theories about long-distance travellers and

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short-distance travellers and how never the twain should meet, for Ken had a lot of brains and was articled to his uncle, an accountant in Manchester. But Betty couldn't help being glad about this through bus, because it was on the 7.16 she met Ken.

The conductor, a cocky little man with a silly moustache, said: "Morning love," as Betty passed him.

Betty said nothing. In her opinion the conductor of the 7:16 was altogether too fond of himself, and would make fewer mistakes with change and tickets if he gave more attention to his work and less to his appearance.

Betty got her usual seat, the next to the back on the left, put her big white bag down on the floor against the side of the bus and looked anxiously at the rest of the queue to see who was likely to sit beside her. Two men followed her in—a tall lean wolfish-looking man, and a short stout sallow man with something foreign about him.

Like all the other men in the bus, they each wore a drab and draggled mackintosh. The tall man had a grey trilby pulled down over one eye, the short one wore a grimly broken-peaked cloth cap.

"I hope neither of them sits next to me," thought Betty.

The short fat man seemed rather inclined to do so, but the tall lean man grasped his arm firmly and pushed him on. The tall lean man had very long dirty nails, and wore a ring on one finger, a kind of cameo ring, thought Betty. They sat down on the back seat just behind Betty, but to her great delight the seat beside her remained empty.

Now the conductor rang the bell, and the 7.16 moved down the hill. The gradient was steep the engine was in low gear. Some of the men passengers added to the considerable noise by bellowing at each other cheerfully.

It was just as they were drawing in to the Hudley stop that it happened. Nearly everyone was getting up or pushing past, or sliding into a vacated seat, so that there was a general hurly-burly. Betty herself was glued to the window, looking out for Ken. Then suddenly the hand of the fat short man jerked over the top of the high back of the seat and rested against Betty's neck. She cried out and turned round, and found herself gazing into the eyes of the tall lean man, who was just rising.

"You don't want to bother about him, miss," he said soothingly, nodding his head towards the short man as he himself moved out into the aisle. "He's got a bit of a hangover, I think. Sleeping it off. I heard him book through to Manchester."

He lifted the fat man's hand away. It was an odd hand for a

passenger on the 7.16 — plump, white, soft, with nails well-manicured. The backs of the seats of this coach were high and though Betty strained her neck up to look over, she caught only a glimpse of the top of the fat man's face. His eyes were closed; he was lying back in the corner of the bus.

Betty turned to the window again. Yes, there was Ken.

He came along the bus towards her, a little shy and awkward with his fair hair anyhow, as usual. He saw her and his whole face lighted and he smiled and sat down beside her and Betty smiled, and they were very happy.

"Any m o r e fares, please," chanted the conductor.

"He's asleep," offered Betty, nodding back towards the fat man. "Booked through to Manchester."

The conductor nodded carelessly and moved on.

All too soon the 7.16 bus approached the suburb of High Roebuck.

"I say—would you care—to go to the the pictures on Sunday evening?" said Ken all in a rush.

"Oh, Ken!" cried Betty, intensely happy. "Yes, please!"

"High Roebuck!" called the conductor.

From the sly look on his face and the tone of his voice he had called it once or twice already. Betty sprang up and hurried out, her cheeks burning. The bus rolled off and Ken waved to her through the window as he passed.

In a dream, Betty turned and walked up to the door, protected by a locked grille, of Messrs. Wadley.

It was then she discovered that in the excitement of Ken's first invitation she had left her bag in the bus.

She ran after the bus shouting: "Stop! Stop!"

"Nay, love, you can't compete with a combustion engine," advised a workman, with a coil of piping over his arm, who was passing by.

"I've left my bag in the bus," wailed Betty.

"Well, don't take on so. Look up the bus headquarters in the telephone book and ring them up. They'll find bag when they clean bus and put it aside for you and you can collect it tonight—or more likely tomorrow morning," advised the plumber.

"But it's got the keys of the shop in it!" wept Betty. "Nobody can get in without them! I lock up at night and unlock in the morning."

The plumber looked grave. "You'd best go to the police," he said, and passed on as if the matter was too much for him.

Betty flew to the High Roebuck police station.

"I don't just see what we could do," said the sergeant in

charge doubtfully. "You could take a taxi and catch the bus, perhaps. But it would cost you money," he added sympathetically.

The young constable at the table in the corner muttered something.

"Aye, well, so you could." The sergeant glanced at Betty's tear-stained face and made up his mind. "All right, then, Fred. You be off. He'll go after the bus on his motor-bike and catch it, and bring back your bag with him," he said smiling at the relief on Betty's face.

Fred, enjoyed the excuse for speed, went after the bus at a fine pace. He caught it up on the moorland road, passed it, wheeled to face it and held up his hand. The bus stopped.

"What's all this, then? Taking a murderer off us, eh?" said the conductor, laughing.

"Something of that sort," agreed the policeman cheerfully. "Now, if you chaps'll just let me pass——."

He edged along the bus to the seat next to the back, moved out the two passengers, stooped and picked up the white bag. Then he exclaimed: "Good Lord!" and stood looking down at it with a sickened expression. He said hoarsely: "It must have been standing in a pool of blood." And added: "There's a diamond sticking to it!"

If Betty Potter had not left her handbag on the 7.16 bus, the murder of James Cardinelli alias Jimmy the Jelly, would not have been discovered so soon. Betty would not have been swept off to the office of the Chief Constable, where she gave an exact description of the tall, lean man —his face, trilby hat, mackintosh, wolfish long-nailed hands, and cameo ring.

And Tedy Bruss, who already had two convictions for burglary, would not have been identified from his photograph within half an hour of committing murder. He might even have got away.

"The two of them robbed a jeweller during the night," the Chief Constable told Betty. "That's where the diamond came from. They quarrelled over sharing the swag, and Ted stuck a knife in him. And thanks to you, we've got him."

The Chief Constable stood up. "Can you beat it," he said, "doing a murder on a bus!"

"All sorts of things happen on the 7.16," said Betty Potter, smiling to herself.

the danger zone

by Erle Stanley Gardner

A FEW blocks to the north of Market Street in San Francisco, Grant Avenue ceases to be a street of high class stores and becomes a part of China.

Major Copely Brane, free-lance diplomat, soldier of fortune, knew every inch of this strange section. For Major Brane knew his Chinese as most baseball fans know the strength and weakness of opposing teams.

Not that Major Brane had consciously confined his free lance diplomatic activities to matters pertaining to the Orient. His services were available to various and sundry. He had accepted employment from a patriotic German who wished to ascertain certain information about the French attitude toward reparations; and it was perhaps significant of the Major's absolute fairness, that the fee he had received from the German upon the successful completion of his task was exactly the amount which he had previously charged a French banker for obtaining confidential information from the file of a visiting ambassador as to the exact proposals which the German government was

Thirty years ago the Overseas Chinese, whether they lived in San Francisco or in Singapore, faced problems similar to those known to this generation. Gardner, best known as the creator of Perry Mason and for his books about Baja California, here writes about those times with obvious understanding.

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Willis Kingley Wing

prepared to make as a final offer.

In short, Major Brane worked for various governments and various individuals. Those who had the price could engage his services. There was only one requirement: the task must be within the legitimate field of diplomatic activity. Major Brane was a clearing house of international and political information, and he took pride in doing his work well. Those who employed him could count upon his absolute loyalty upon all matters connected with the employment, could bank upon his subsequent silence; and best of all, they could rest assured that if Major Brane encountered any serious trouble in the discharge of his duties, he would never mention the name of his employer.

Of late, however, the Major's activities had been centered upon the situation in the Orient. This was due in part to the extreme rapidity with which that situation was changing from day to day; and in part to the fact that Major Brane prided himself upon his ability to deliver results. There is no one who appreciates results more, and explanations less, than the native of the Orient.

It was early evening, and the streets of San Francisco's Chinatown were giving forth their strange sounds — the shuffling feet of herded tourists, gazing open-mouthed at the strange life which seethed about them; the slippety-slop of Chinese shoes—skidded along the cement by feet that were lifted only a fraction of an inch; the pounding heels of plain clothes men who always worked in pairs when on Chinatown duty.

Major Brane's ears heard these sounds and interpreted them mechanically. Major Brane was particularly interested to notice the changing window displays of the Chinese stores. The embargo on Japanese products was slowly working a complete change in the merchandise handled by the curio stores, and Major Brane's eyes narrowed as he noticed the fact. Disputes over the murder of a subject can be settled by arbitration, but there can be but one answer to a blow that hits hard at a nation's business.

Major Brane let his mind dwell upon certain angles of the political situation which were unknown to the average man. Would the world powers close their eyes to developments in Manchuria, providing those same developments smashed the five year plan and . . . ?

His ears, trained to constant watchfulness in the matter of unusual sounds, noticed the change in the tempo of the hurrying feet behind him. He knew that some man was going to accost him, even before he turned ap-

praising eyes upon the other.

The man was Chinese, probably Western born, since he wore his Occidental clothes with the air of one who finds in them nothing awkward; and he thudded his feet emphatically upon the sidewalk, slamming his heels hard home with every step.

He had been hurrying, and the narrow chest was laboring. The eyes were glittering with some inner emotion of which there was no other external sign, save, perhaps, a very slight muscular tenseness about the expressionless mask of the face.

"Major Brane," he said in excellent English, and then stopped to suck in a lungful of air. "I have been to your hotel. You were out. I came here. I saw you, and ran."

Major Brane bowed, and his bow was polite, yet uncordial. Major Brane did not like to have men run after him on the street. Much of his employment entailed very grave dangers, and it was always advisable to keep his connections as secret as possible. Grant Avenue, in the heart of San Francisco's Chinatown, at the hour of eight forty-seven in the evening, was hardly a proper place to discuss matters of business—not when the business of the person accosted was that of interfering with the political situation in the far east.

"Well?" said Major Brane.

"You must come, sir!"

"Where?"

"To my grandfather."

"And who is your grandfather?"

"Wong Sing Lee."

The lad spoke in the Chinese manner, giving the surname first. Major Brane knew that the family of Wong was very powerful, and that Chinese venerate age, age being synonymous with wisdom. Therefore, the grandfather of the panting youth must be a man of great importance in the social fabric of Chinatown. Yet Major Brane could recall no prominent member of the Wong family whose given name was Sing Lee. Somehow, the entire name sounded manufactured for the occasion.

Major Brane turned these matters over in his mind rapidly.

"I am afraid I am not at liberty to accept," he said. "Will you convey my very great regrets to your estimable grandparent?"

The lad's hand moved swiftly. His face remained utterly expressionless, but the black lacquer of the eyes assumed a reddish glint which would have spoken volumes to those who have studied the psychology of the Oriental.

"You come!" he said fiercely, his voice almost breaking, "or I kill!"

Major Brane squared his shoulders, studied the face intently. "You might get away with it," he said, in a dispassionate

voice that was almost impersonal, "but you'd be caught before you'd gone twenty feet—and you'd be hung for it."

The boy's eyes still held their reddish glint. "Without the help which you alone can give," he said, "death is preferable to life!"

And it was only because Major Brane knew his Chinese so well that he determined to accompany the boy, when he heard that burst of impassioned speech. When your Chinese resolves upon murder, he is very, very cool; and very, very wily. Only when a matter of honor is concerned, only when there is a danger of "losing face," does he resolve upon a heedless sacrifice. But when such occasions arise, he considers his own life of but minor moment.

Major Brane nodded. "Remove your hand from the gun," he said. "There is a plain clothes man coming this way. I will go with you."

He reached out, clamped a friendly hand about the arm of the youth, taking hold of the muscles just above the elbow. If the plain clothes officer should accost them, Major Brane wanted to prevent the youth from doing anything rash. And as his fingers clamped about the arm, Major Brane felt the quivering of the flesh, that tremor which comes from taut nerves.

"Steady!" he warned.

There is a popular belief that the Chinese is unemotional. The fallacy of that belief is on a par with the hundreds of fallacies which bar an understanding of the Orient by the Occident. Major Brane realized just how deadly dangerous the present situation was. If the officer should insist upon searching the youth for a weapon . . . But the officer was reassured by Major Brane's words.

"If it's real jade," said Major Brane in a loud tone of voice, regarding the bulge in the pocket of the youth's coat, "I'll look at it, but I want a bargain."

The officer veered off. The Chinese glittered his beady eyes at Major Brane and said nothing. A casual observer would have gathered that he was totally oblivious of the danger he had just escaped as well as the ruse by which he had been saved. But the reddish tinge left the surface of the eyes, and the boy took a deep breath.

"M'goy!" he muttered mechanically, which is a Cantonese expression of thanks, and means, "I am not worthy."

Major Brane made the prompt reply which etiquette demanded.

"Hoh wah!" he said, which in turn means, "good talk!"

And the fact that most Westerners would have found the words amusing as well as entirely unrelated to expressions of thanks and welcome is but il-

lustrative of the gulf between the races.

The young Chinese led the way down a side street. Major Brane fell in slightly behind, walked unhesitatingly, his hands swinging free, making no covert effort to reach toward the shoulder holster which was slung beneath his left arm. He had given his word, and his word had been accepted.

They paused before a dark door, which was the center one of a row of dark doors. Apparently these entrances were to separate buildings, huddled closely together in the congestion of poverty; but when the door swung open, Major Brane found himself in a courtyard enclosed by a brick wall. The enclosure was spacious and airy. The other doors had been but dummies set in the brick wall, and were kept locked. Had one opened any one of those other doors, he would have encountered nothing but brick.

Major Brane gave no evidences of surprise. He had been in such places before. The Chinese of wealth always builds his house with a cunning simulation of external poverty. In the Orient one may look in vain for mansions, unless one has the entree to private homes. The street entrances always give the impression of congestion and poverty, and the lines of architecture are carefully carried out so that no glimpse of the mansion itself is visible over the forbidding false front of what appears to be a squalid hovel.

"Quickly!" breathed the Chinese.

His feet pattered over flags, paused at an entrance, to the side of which was an altar and the Chinese characters which signify the presence of Toe Day, the god whose duty it is to frighten away the "homeless ghosts" who would attach themselves to the family, yet will permit free access to the spirits of departed ancestors.

A bell jangled. The door swung open. A huge Chinese servant stood in the doorway.

"The master awaits," he said.

The boy pushed his way into the house, through a reception room furnished in conventional dark wood furnishings, into an inner room, the doorway to which was a circle with a high ledge at the entrance, to keep away evil spirits.

Major Brane knew at once that he was dealing with an old family who had retained all the conventions of ten thousand years; knew, also that he would be kept with his back to the door if he were received as a prisoner, and given a seat across the room, facing the doorway, if he were an honored guest.

His eyes, suddenly grown as hard as polished steel, surveyed the interior of the room. An old

man sat on a low stool. A wisp of white beard straggled down from either side of his chin. His face was withered and wrinkled. Most of the hair was gone from the head. The nails of the little fingers were almost three inches long. The left hand waved toward a stool which was at the end of the room facing the door.

"*Cheng nay choh,*" he said to Major Brane, and the boy interpreted. "Please sit down," he said.

Major Brane heaved a sigh of relief as he sat down upon the rigidly uncomfortable chair which faced the doorway—the seat of honor.

The servant brought him a cup of tea and a plate of dried melon seeds, which he set down upon a stand of teakwood inlaid with ivory and jade. Major Brane knew that regardless of the urgency of the matter in hand, it would not be broached until he had partaken of the food and drink, so he sipped the scalding tea, took a melon seed between his teeth, cracked it and extracted the meat with a celerity which branded him at once as one who knew his way about. Chopsticks can be mastered with a few lessons, but not so with the technique of melon seeds.

The old man sucked up a bamboo pipe, the bowl of which was of soft metal. It was packed with *sook yen*, the Chinese tobacco which will eat the membranes from an uneducated throat. He gurgled into speech.

There was no doubt in Major Brane's mind but that the young boy would act as interpreter; and he guessed that the lad was quite familiar with the situation, and eager to express himself upon it. Yet such is the veneration for age that the boy kept his eyes upon the old man's face, listening intently, ready to interpret, not what he himself wanted to say, but what the head of the family should utter.

For some three minutes the old man spoke. Major Brane caught a word here and there, and, as his ears conveyed those words to his consciousness, Major Brane sat very rigidly attentive.

The boy interpreted, when the grandfather had finished speaking; and his voice held that absence of tone which comes to one who is repeating but the words of another.

"Jee Kit King has been taken by our enemies. She will be tortured. Even now, they are preparing to start the torture. She will be tortured until she speaks or until she dies, and she will not speak. You are to save her. You must work with speed. And your own life will be in danger."

Major Brane snapped questions. "Who are your enemies?"

"Enemies of China."

"Who are they?"

"We do not know."

"How long has the girl been missing?"

"Less than one hour."

"Why do they torture her?"

"To find out what she did with the evidence."

"What evidence?"

That question brought a period of silence. Then the boy turned to the old man and rattled forth a swift sentence of Cantonese. Major Brane underestood enough of that question to know that the youth was asking the old man for permission to give Major Brane the real facts; but even as the old man pursed his puckered lips about the stained mouthpiece of the pipe, Major Brane sensed that the reply would be adverse.

In fact there was no reply at all. The old man smoked placidly, puffing out the oily tobacco smoke, his eyes glittering, fixed upon the distance.

The young man whirled back to Major Brane, lowered his voice.

"There is, in this city, Mah Bak Heng, who comes from Canton."

Major Brane let his eyes show merely polite interest. He already knew much of Mah Bak Heng, and of his mission, but he kept that knowledge from showing in his eyes.

The boy began to outline certain salient facts.

"Mah Bak Heng has power in Canton. Canton is in revolt against the Nanking government. The Nanking government wishes to unite China to the end that war may be declared upon Japan, over Manchuria. Until the Canton matter is fixed, there can be no war. Canton has money and influence . . .

"Mah Bak Heng keeps peace from being made. He cables his men to yield to the Nanking government only upon terms that are impossible. Mah Bak Heng is a traitor. He is accepting pay from enemies of China, to keep the revolution alive. If we could prove that, the people of Canton would no longer listen to the voice of the traitor.

"Jee Kit King is my sister. This man is the grandfather. We talked it over. Jee Kit King has studied in the business schools. She can write down the words of a man as fast as a man can speak, and then she can copy those words upon a typewriter. She is very bright. She agreed that she would trap Mah Bak Heng into employing her as his secretary. Then, when the payment for his treason was delivered, she would get sufficient evidence to prove that payment, and would come to us.

"We know she secured that evidence. She left the place of Mah Bak Heng. But on the way here, two men spoke to her. She accompanied them to a cab. She has not been seen since."

The boy ceased speaking, drew

a quivering breath.

The old man puffed placidly upon the last dying embers of the oily tobacco, reached a stained thumb and forefinger into a time-glazed pouch of leather for a fresh portion.

Major Brane squinted his eyes slightly in thought. "Perhaps she went with friends."

"No. They were enemies."

"She had the evidence with her?"

"Apparently not."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, just before I went to you, three men came hurriedly to her room and made a search."

Major Brane puckered his forehead in thought.

"That means?" he asked.

"That they captured her, searched her but could not find that which they sought, and then went to the room, thinking it was hidden there."

"And not finding it?" asked Major Brane.

"Not finding it, they will torture Jee Kit King." The boy wet his lips with the tip of his tongue, gave a motion that was like a shudder. "They are very cruel," he said. "They can torture well. They remove the clothes, string the body by hands and feet, and build small fires in the middle of the back."

"The girl will not speak?" inquired Major Brane. "Not even under torture?"

"She will not speak."

"How can I save her? There is no time. Even now they will have started the torture," said Major Brane, and he strove to make his tone as kindly as possible.

The boy gave vent to a little scream. His hand flashed out from his pocket. The last vestige of self control left him. He thrust a trembling revolver barrel into the middle of Major Brane's stomach.

"When she dies," he screamed "you die! You can save her! You alone. You have knowledge in such matters. If she dies, you die. I swear it, by the memory of my ancestors!"

Major Brane glanced sideways at the menace of the cocked revolver, the quivering hand. He knew too well the danger in which he was placed. He looked at the old man, saw that he was lighting a fresh bowl of tobacco and that the clawlike hand which held the flaming match was as steady as a rock. The ebony eyes were still fixed upon distance. He had not so much as turned his head.

Major Brane realized several things. "I will do my best," he soothed, and gently moved backward, as though to get to his feet. The motion pushed the gun a little to one side. "If this girl is your sister," he said, "why is she a Jee, when your grandfather is a Wong?"

"She is not my sister. I love her. I am to marry her!—You must save her. Fast! Quick! Go and do something, and prepare to die if you do not. Here, you can have money, money in plenty!"

The old man, his eyes still fixed upon space, his head never turning, reached his left hand beneath the folds of his robe and tossed a leather bag toward Major Brane. The mouth of the bag was open, and the light glinted upon a great roll of currency.

"Where does the girl have her room?" asked Major Brane, making no move to reach for the money.

The boy was too nervous to speak. He seemed about to faint or to become hysterical. The shaking hand which held the revolver jiggled the weapon about in a half circle.

"Quick!" snapped Major Brane. "If I am to be of help I must know where she lives."

But the boy only writhed his lips.

It was the old man who answered. He removed the stained stem of the pipe from his mouth, and Brane was surprised to hear him speak in excellent English.

"She has a room at Number Thirteen Twenty-Two Stockton Street," he said. "The room is maintained in her name."

Major Brane swung his eyes.

"I've seen you somewhere before . . ." he said, and would have said more. But as though some giant hand had snuffed out the lights, the room became suddenly dark, a pitch black darkness that was as oppressive as a blanket. And the darkness gave forth the rustling sound of bodies, moving with surreptitious swiftness.

Major Brane flung himself to one side. His hand darted beneath the lapel of his coat, clutched the reassuring bulk of the automatic which reposed in the shoulder holster.

Then the lights came on, as abruptly as they had been extinguished. The room was exactly as it had been three or four seconds before, save that Major Brane was the only occupant. The chairs were there. The old mna's pipe, the bowl still smoking and the oily tobacco sizzling against the sides of the metal, was even propped against a small table.

But the old Chinese grandfather and the boy himself had disappeared.

A man came shuffling along the flags of the outer room. It was the same servant who had escorted Major Brane into the room.

"What you want here?" he asked.

"I want to see the master."

"Master not home. You go out now."

Major Brane holstered his weapon, smiled affably. "Very well."

The servant slip-slopped to the courtyard, unlocked the door.

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye," observed Major Brane, and stepped out into the street.

A fog was coming in, and its first damp, writhing tendrils were clutching at the dim corners of the mysterious buildings. The sounds of traffic from the main avenues came to him, muffled as though they were the sounds of another world.

Major Brane moved, and as he moved a patch of shadow across the street slipped into furtive motion. A stooped figure hugged the patch of darkness which extended along the front of the dark and silent buildings. Another figure walked casually out of the doorway of a building at the corner, stood in the light, looking up and down the lighted thoroughfare. It might have been waiting for a friend. A bulky figure, padded out with a quilted coat, hands thrust up the sleeves, came from a doorway to the rear and started walking directly toward Major Brane.

Major Brane sighed, turned, and walked rapidly toward the lighted thoroughfare. The fact that the boy had been forced to accost him on the street made it doubly inconvenient. Things which happen upon the streets of Chinatown seldom go unobserved.

Major Brane had no way of knowing who those shadowing figures might be; they might be friends of the people who had employed him, keeping a watch upon him lest he seek to escape the trust which had been thrust upon him, or they might be emissaries of the enemy, seeking to balk him in accomplishing anything of value.

But one thing was positive. Somewhere in the city a Chinese girl was held in restraint by enemies who were, in all probability, proceeding even now to a slow torture that would either end in speech or death. And another thing was equally positive: unless Major Brane could effect the rescue of that girl, he could count his own life as forfeit. The young man had sworn upon the memory of his ancestors, and such oaths are not to be disregarded. Moreover, there had been the silent acquiescence of the old man.

"Grandfather! sputtered Major Brane under his breath. "He's no more her grandfather than I am! I've seen him before somewhere, and I'll place him yet!"

But he knew better than to waste any mental energy in jogging a tardy recollection. Major Brane was having his hands full at the moment. He had a task before him which required rare

skill, and the price of failure would be death.

He reached back for his tobacco pouch, and his hand touched something which swung in a dangling circle from the skirt of his coat. He pulled the garment around. The thing was the leather pouch which the old man had tossed to him. It was filled with greenbacks of large denomination, rolled tightly together.

That bag must have been pinned to his coat by the old servant as he was leaving the courtyard. The knowledge gave Major Brane a feeling of mingled security and uneasiness. That meant that at least one of his shadows must be in the employ of the old man who had posed as the girl's grandfather. That shadow would make certain that Major Brane found the sack of currency, that it did not come loose and roll unheeded into the gutter.

But there were three shadows. What of the other two? And there was the disquieting knowledge that even the friendly shadow would become hostile should Major Brane fail in his undertaking.

The young man had promised that Brane should not outlive the girl; and the promise had been sworn by the sacred memory of the young man's ancestors.

Major Copely Brane walked directly to his room in the hotel, which was almost on the outskirts of Chinatown. That step was, at least, noncommittal, and Major Brane needed time to think. Also, he had a secret method of exit from that room in the hotel.

He opened the door with his key, switched on the lights, bolted the door behind him, and dropped into a chair. He held his arm at an angle so that his wrist watch ticked off the seconds before his eyes.

He knew that it was hopeless to plunge blindly into the case without a plan of campaign. And he knew that it would be fatal to consume too much time in thought. Therefore he allowed himself precisely three minutes of concentration—one hundred and eighty seconds within which to work out some plan which might save the life of the girl, and, incidentally, preserve his own safety.

He thought of Mah Bak Heng. Major Brane had some shrewd suspicions about Mah Bak Heng, but he had no proof. There was a chance that those suspicions could be converted into proof by the burglary of a certain safe. But that burglary would take time. Even with the necessary proof, Major Brane would be no nearer locating those who held the girl captive; and she would be dead long before he could bring sufficient pressure to bear

upon the Chinese politician to force a trade or treaty.

Major Brane squirmed uneasily in his chair. Thirty seconds had ticked by. He might trust to blind chance, figure out who would probably be chosen to kidnap a girl who had acquired dangerous information, make a guess as to the location that would be picked upon for torture. But there was only one chance in a hundred that, with all of his shrewd knowledge of things Oriental, he would be able to make a correct guess. Then there would remain the task of effecting a rescue.

No. The girl would have died a slow death long before such a plan could be carried into execution.

Forty-five seconds gone.

Major Brane shifted the position of his legs. His eyes were cold and hard as polished steel. His jaw was thrust forward. His lips were a thin line of determination. The light illuminated the delicately chiseled lines of his aristocratic face.

He went back to the first principles of deductive reasoning. The girl was a spy. She had evidently secured the thing that would link Mah Bak Heng with interests that were inimical to China. That thing would, if Major Brane read his man right, be in the nature of cash. But cash leaves no trail. Therefore, the thing which the girl had secured was something equivalent to cash, which also indicated the person who had paid the cash. It was a safe bet that this something had been a check.

She had left the place, seeking her friends; and the enemy had known she was a spy—at least that soon, perhaps before. Had the girl been aware that her disguise had been penetrated? That was a question which could only be answered in the light of subsequent events. Those subsequent events proved that the girl had been "taken for a ride" by her enemies. Undoubtedly, she had been searched almost immediately; and the subsequent searching of her rooms would indicate that this search had been fruitless.

So far, then, the enemies were deprived of the evidence which they had sought to take from the girl. The girl had hidden it in some place that was not on her person. Where?

Obviously, those enemies had thought the most likely place was the girl's bedroom. Rightly or wrongly, they had reasoned that the check was hidden there.

It was impossible now to find the girl within the time necessary to save her life; but the people who held her captive would torture her, not for the pleasure of torture, but for the purpose of securing that which they coveted —the check. Therefore, if they

secured the check without torture, they would refrain from torture.

That thought lodged in Major Brane's mind, and he immediately seized upon it as being the key to the situation. His eyes stared unwinkingly, his brows deepened into straight lines of thought.

Then, after a few moments, he nodded his head. His eyes snapped to a focus upon the dial of the wrist watch. The time lacked thirteen seconds of the three-minute limit which he had imposed upon himself.

Major Brane crossed to a desk in one corner of his room. That desk contained many curious odds and ends. They were articles which Major Brane had collected against future contingencies, and they dealt with many phases of the Orient. He selected a tinted oblong of paper. It was a check upon a bank that was known for its connections in the far east. The check was, of course, blank. Major Brane filled it in.

The name of the payee was Mah Bak Heng. The amount caused Major Brane some deliberation. He finally resolved upon the figure of fifty thousand dollars. He felt that in all probability that amount would be the top price for the final payment, and he knew Mah Bak Heng well enough to believe that he would command the top price for the final payment, assuming that there had been several previous payments.

It was when it came to filling in the name of the payer at the bottom of the check that Major Brane pulled his master stroke. There was a slight smile twisting the corners of his lips as he made a very credible forgery of a signature. The signature was that of a man who was utterly unknown in the Oriental situation, save by a very select few. But Major Brane had always made it his business to secure knowledge which was not available to the average diplomat.

He blotted the check, folded it once, straightened the fold and folded it again. Then he began to fold it into the smallest possible compass, taking care to iron down each fold with the handle of an ivory paper knife. When he had finished, the check was but a tight wad of paper, folded into an oblong.

Major Brane took the cellophane wrapping from a package of cigarettes, carefully wrappnig the spurious check in it, and thrusting the tiny package into his pocket.

He left his room by the secret exit: through the connecting door into another room; through another connecting door into a room that had a window that opened on a fire escape platform; out the window to the platform; along the platform to a

door; through the door to a back staircase; down the stairs to an alley exit; out the alley to the side street.

He hailed a passing cab and gave the address of the building where Jee Kit King had her residence. As the cab swung into speed, Major Brane looked behind him.

There were two cars, following closely.

Major Brane sighed wearily. It was no surprise; merely what he had expected. He was dealing with men who were very, very capable. He didn't know whether he had shaken off one of the shadows, or whether one of the following cars held two men, the other holding one; but he was inclined to believe all three were following, two in one car, one in the other.

He made an abortive effort to shake off the pursuit. It was an effort that was purposely clumsy. The following cars dropped well to the rear, however, and switched off their lights.

A less experienced man than Major Brane would have believed that the ruse had been a success, and that the shadows were lost. Major Brane merely smiled and sent the cab rushing to the address where the girl had lived.

He found her apartment without difficulty.

It was on a third floor. The lodgings were, for the most part, given over to people of limited means who were neat and cleanly, but economical.

The door of the girl's apartment was locked. Major Brane hesitated over that lock only long enough to get a key that would turn the bolt; and his collection of skeleton keys was sufficiently complete to cut that delay to a period of less than four seconds. He entered the apartment, leaving the door open behind him; not much, just a sufficient crack to insure against a surreptitious bolting from the outer side without his knowledge.

When he had jerked out a few drawers and rumpled a few clothes, Major Brane picked up a jar of cold cream. A frown of annoyance crossed his features as he saw that there was only a small amount of cream in the jar.

But in the bathroom he found a fresh jar, unopened. He unscrewed the top, thrust the cellophane-wrapped check deep down into the greasy mixture. He let it remain there for a few seconds, then fished it out again. In taking it out, he smeared a copious supply of cold cream over the edge of the jar, and wiped his fingers on a convenient towel, leaving the excess cold cream smeared about the edge of the jar, a deep hole in the center of the cream.

Unwrapping the cellophane, he left it on the shelf over the

washstand, a transparent oblong of paper smeared with cold cream; left it in such a shape that it was readily apparent it had served as a container for some small object.

Then Major Brane, pocketing the spurious check, wiped his hands carefully to remove all traces of the cream from his fingertips, but was careful to leave a sufficient deposit under the nails of his fingers to be readily detected.

He walked to the door of the apartment, peered out. The hallway seemed deserted. As furtively as a thief in the night, Major Brane tiptoed down this hallway, came to the stairs, took them upon cautious feet, emerged upon the sidewalk.

He motioned to his cab driver.

"Married?" he asked.

The man nodded.

"Children?"

Another nod.

"Remember them, then, if anything happens," said Major Brane. "Your first duty is to them."

"I'll say it is!" agreed the cab driver. "What's the racket?"

"Nothing," commented Major Brane crisply. "I simply wanted to impress that particular thought on your mind. Swing toward Chinatown, and drive as fast as you can. Keep to the dark side streets."

"Whereabouts in Chinatown?"

"It doesn't matter. Just in that general direction."

"And drive fast?"

"Take 'em on two wheels!"

"Get in!" snapped the driver.

He slammed the door. The cab started with a jerk. The tires screamed on the first corner, but all four wheels remained on the pavement. The cabbie did better at the second corner. Then he nearly tipped over as he cut into a dark side street.

Major Brane gave no sign of nervousness. He was watching the road behind him, and his eyes were cold and hard, frosty in their unwinking stare.

They were midway in the block when a car swung into the cross street. It was a low roadster, powerful, capable of great speed, and it swept down on the taxicab as a hawk swoops upon a sparrow. The head lights were dark, and the car flashed through the night like some sinister beast of prey.

The cab had just turned into the second intersection when the roadster drew alongside. There sounded a swift explosion that might have been a backfire. The taxicab swerved as a rear tire went out. Then it settled to the rim and the *thunkety-thunk-thunk-thunk*, marked the revolutions as the cab skidded to the pavement and stopped.

The cab driver turned a white face to Major Brane, started to

say something, then, thrust his hands up as high as he could get them, the fingertips jammed into the top of the roof. For he was gazing directly into the business end of a large calibre automatic, held in the hands of one of the figures that had leapt from the roadster. The other figure was holding a sub machine gun pointed directly at Major Brane's stomach.

Both of the men were masked.

"Seem to have tire trouble," said one of the men. He spoke in the peculiar accents of a foreigner whose language is more staccato than musical.

Major Brane kept his hands in sight, but he did not elevate them. "Yes," he said.

The man with the sub machine gun grinned. His flashing teeth were plainly visible below the protection of the mask.

He spoke English with the easy familiarity of one who has spoken no other language since birth. "Better come ride with us," he said. "You seemed to be in a hurry, and it'll take time to repair that tire."

"I'd prefer to wait," said Major Brane, and smiled.

"I'd prefer to have you ride," said the man with the sub machine gun, politely, and the muzzle wavered suggestively in a little arc that took in Major Brane's torso. "You might find it healthier to ride."

"Thanks" said Major Brane. "I'll ride, then."

The man in the roadster snapped a command. "Open the car door for him," he said.

The one who held the automatic stretched back his left hand, worked the catch of the door.

"Okay," said the man in the roadster.

Major Brane stumbled. As he stumbled, he threw forth his hand to catch his balance, and the other hand slipped the folded check from his pocket. He lowered his head, thrust check in his mouth.

The man with the automatic jumped toward him. The man with the sub machine gun laughed sarcastically.

"No you don't," he said. "Get it!"

The last two words were cracked at the man who had held the automatic. That man leapt forward. Stubby fingers, that were evidently well acquainted with the human anatomy, pressed against nerve centers in Major Brane's neck. Brane writhed with pain, and opened his jaw. The folded bit of tinted paper dropped to the pavement. The man swooped down upon it, picked it up with eager hands.

A police whistle trilled through the night.

"In!" crisped the man with the sub machine gun.

Major Brane felt arms about

him, felt his automatic whisked from its holster. Then he was boosted into the roadster. The gears clashed. The car lurched into speed.

Behind him, Major Brane could hear the taxicab driver yelling for the police, so loudly as to send echoes from the sides of the sombre buildings that lined the dark street.

The roadster's lights clicked on. The man who had held the sub machine gun was driving. The other man was crowded close beside Major Brane's neck, the other jabbing the end of the automatic into Major Brane's ribs.

The man at the wheel knew the city, and he knew his car. The machine kept almost entirely to dark side streets and went swiftly. Within five minutes, it had turned to an alley on a steep hill, slid slowly downward, wheels rubbing against brake bands.

A garage door silently opened. The roadster went into the garage. The door closed. The roadster lights were switched off. A door opened from the side of the garage.

"Well?" said a voice.

"We got it. He found it. We grabbed him. He tried to swallow it, but we got it."

"Where was it?" asked the voice from the darkness.

"In a jar of cold cream in her apartment."

The voice made no answer. For several seconds the weight of the dark silence oppressed them. Then the voice gave a crisp command.

"Bring him in."

The man who had driven the car took Major Brane's arm above the elbow. The other man, an arm still around Major Brane's neck, jabbed the gun firmly against his ribs.

"Okay, guy. No funny stuff," said the one who had held the machine gun.

Major Brane groped with his feet, found the floor. The guards were on either side of him, pushing him forward. A door opened, disclosing a glow of diffused light. A flight of stairs led upward.

"Up and at 'em!" said the man on Major Brane's left.

They clumped up the stairs, maintaining their awkward formation of three abreast. There was a landing at the top, then a hallway. Major Brane was taken down the hallway, into a room that was furnished with exquisite care, a room in which massive furniture dwarfed the high ceilings, the wide windows. Those windows were covered with heavy drapes that had been tightly drawn.

Major Brane was pushed into a chair.

"Park yourself, guy."

Major Brane sank into the cushions. His hands were on the

arms of the chair. The room was deserted, save for his two guards. The man whose voice had given the orders to the pair was nowhere in evidence.

"May I smoke?" asked Major Brane.

The masked guard grinned. "Brother," he said, "if there's any smoking to be done, I'll do it. You just sit pretty like you were having your picture taken, and don't make no sudden moves. I've got your gat; but they say you're full of tricks, and if I was to see any sudden moves, I'd have to cut you open to see whether you was stuffed with sawdust or tricks. You've got my curiosity aroused."

Major Brane said nothing.

The man who had taken the check walked purposefully toward one of the draped exits, pushed aside the rich hangings and disappeared.

Major Brane eyed the masked figure who remained to guard him. The man grinned.

"Don't bother," he said. "You wouldn't know me, even if it wasn't for the mask."

Major Brane lowered his voice, cautiously. "Are you in this thing for money?" he asked.

The man grinned. "No, no, brother. You got me wrong. I'm in it for my health!" And he laughed gleefully.

Major Brane was earnest. "They've got the check. That's all they're concerned with. There'd be some money in it for you if you let me go."

The eyes glittered through the mask in scornful appraisal. "Think I'm a fool?"

Major Brane leaned forward, very slightly. "They won't hurt me,' he said, "and the check's gone already. But there are some other important papers that I don't want them to find. They simply can't find them—mustn't. Those papers are worth a great deal to certain parties, and it would be most unfortunate if they should fall into the hands of these men who were interested in the check. If you would only accept those papers and deliver them to the proper parties, you could get enough money to make you independent for years to come."

The eyes back of the mask were no longer scornful. "Where are these papers?" asked the man.

"You promise you'll deliver them?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"In my cigarette case," said Major Brane. "Get them—quick!"

And he half raised his hands.

The masked figure came to him in two swift strides.

"No you don't! Keep your hands down. I'll get the cigarette case.—In your inside pocket, eh? All right, guy; try anything and you'll get bumped!" He held a heavy gun in his left hand, thrust an exploring right hand into

Major Brane's inside coat pocket. He extracted the cigarette case, grinned at Major Brane, stepped back.

"I said I'd deliver 'em. That was a promise. The only thing I didn't promise was who I'd deliver 'em to. I'll have to take a look at 'em first. I might be interested myself." And he gloatingly held the cigarette case up, pressed the catch.

That cigarette case had been designed by Major Brane against just such an emergency. The man pressed the catch. The halves flew open, and a spring mechanism shot a stream of ammonia full into the man's eyes.

Major Brane was out of the chair with a flashing spurt of motion which was deadly and swift. His right hand crossed over in the sort of blow which is only given by the trained boxer. It was a perfectly timed blow, the powerful muscles of the body swinging into play as the fist pivoted over and around.

The man with the mask caught the blow on the button of the jaw. Major Brane listened for an instant, but no one seemed to have heard the man's fall. He walked swiftly to the doorway which led into the hall, then down the hall and down the steps to the garage. He opened the garage door, got in the roadster, turned on the ignition, stepped on the starter. The motor throbbed into life.

A light flashed on in the garage. A grotesque figure stumbled out through the door, silhouetted as a black blotch against the light of the garage. The man was waving his arms, shouting.

Major Brane spun the wheel, sent the car skidding around the corner. Behind him, there sounded a single shot; and the bullet whined from the pavement. There were no more shots.

Major Brane stepped on the gas.

He drove three blocks toward the south, headed toward Market Street. He saw a garage that was open, slowed the car, swung the wheel, rolled into the garage.

"Storage," he said.

"Day, week or month?" asked the man in overalls and faded coat who slouched forward.

"Just for an hour or two; maybe all night.'

The attendant grinned. "Four bits," he said.

Major Brane nodded, handed him half a dollar, received an oblong of pasteboard with a number. He turned, walked out of the garage, paused at the curb and tore the oblong of numbered pasteboard into small bits. Then he started walking, directing his steps over the same route he had travelled in the roadster.

He heard the snarl of a racing motor, the peculiar screaming noise made by protesting tires

when a corner is rounded too fast, and he stepped back into a doorway. A touring car shot past. There were three men in it; three grim figures who sat very erect and whose hands were concealed.

When the car had passed, Major Brane stepped out and resumed his rapid walk, back toward the house from which he had escaped.

He walked up the hill. The garage was dark now, but the door was still open.

Major Brane walked cautiously, but kept up his speed. He slipped into the dark garage, waited, advanced, tried the door which opened to the flight of stairs. The door was locked now, from the inside. Major Brane stopped, applied an eye to the keyhole. The key, he saw, was in the lock.

He took out his skeleton keys, also a long, slender-bladed penknife. With the point of the knife blade he worked the end of the key around, up and down, up and down. Gradually, as he freed the key, the heavier end, containing the flange, had a tendency to drop down. Major Brane manipulated the key until this tendency had ample opportunity to assert itself. Then he pushed with the point of the knife. The key slid out of the lock, thudded to the floor on the other side of the door.

Major Brane inserted a skeleton key, pressed up and around on the key, felt the bolt snap back, and opened the door. The little entranceway with the flight of stairs was before him. Major Brane walked cautiously up those stairs. His eyes were slitted, his body poised for swift action.

He gained the hallway at the top of the stairs, started down is cautiously. He could hear voices from a room at one end of the corridor, voices that were raised in excited conversation. Major Brane avoided that room but slipped into the room which adjoined it. That room was dark; and Major Brane, closing the door behind him, listened for a moment while he stood perfectly still, his every faculty concentrated.

He was standing so, when there sounded the click of a light switch and the room was flooded with light.

A rather tall man with a black beard, and eyes that seemed the shade of dulled silver, was standing by a light switch, holding a huge automatic in a hand that was a mass of bony knuckles, of long fingers and black hair.

"Sit down, Major Brane," said the man.

Major Brane sighed, for the man was he whose name Major Brane had forged to the spurious check.

The man chuckled. "Do you know, Major, I rather expected

you back. Clever, aren't you? But after one has dealt with you a few times he learns to anticipate your little schemes."

Major Brane said nothing. He stood rigidly motionless, taking great care not to move his hands. He knew this man, knew the ruthless cruelty of him, the shrewd resourcefulness of his mind, the deadly determination which actuated him.

"Do sit down, Major."

Major Brane crossed to a chair sat down.

The man with the beard let the tips of his white teeth glitter below the gloss of dark hairs which swept his upper lip in smooth regularity. The tip of the pointed beard quivered as the chin muscles twitched. "Yes," he said, "I expected you back."

Major Brane nodded. "I didn't know *you* were here," he observed. "Otherwise I would have been more cautious."

"Thanks for the compliment, Major. Incidentally, my associates here know me by the name of Brinkhoff. It would be most unfortunate if they should learn of my real identity, or of my connections."

"Unfortunate for you?" asked Major Brane meaningly.

The teeth glittered again as the lips swept back in a mirthless and all but noiseless laugh.

"Unfortunate for both of us, Major. Slightly unfortunate for me, but doubly—trebly—unfortunate for you."

Major Brane nodded. "Very well, Mr. Brinkhoff," he said.

The dulled silver eyes regarded him speculatively, morosely. "Rather clever of you to prepare a forgery which you could use as a red herring to drag across the trail," he said. "That's what comes of trusting subordinates. As soon as they told me how clumsy you were in your attempt to thrust the check into your mouth and swallow it, I knew they had been duped.—Fools! They were laughing over your clumsy attempt! Bah!"

Major Brane inclined his head. "Thank you, Brinkhoff."

Ominous lights glinted back of the dulled silver of the eyes. "Well," rasped the man, after a moment, "what did you do with it?"

"The original?"

"Naturally."

Major Brane took a deep breath. "I placed it where you could never find it, of course."

The teeth shone again as the man grinned. "No you didn't, Major. You took advantage of your arrival here to conceal it some place in the room—perhaps in the cushion of the chair. When you escaped, you went in a hurry to draw pursuit. You returned to get the check."

Major Brane shook his head. "No. The check isn't in the house. I placed it where it would be safe. I returned for the girl."

A frown divided the man's forehead. "You hid it?"

Major Brane chose his words carefully. "I feel certain that it is safe from discovery," he said.

The man with the beard rasped out an oath, started toward Major Brane.

"Damn you," he gritted, "I believe you're telling the truth! I told them you'd come back after the girl. That's why I had them carrying on a loud conversation in the next room. I thought you'd try to slip in here and listen, particularly if the room was dark."

Major Brane inclined his head. "Well reasoned," he said. His voice was as impersonally courteous as that of a tennis player who mutters a "well played" to his opponent.

For a long three seconds the two men locked eyes.

"There are ways," said the bearded man, ending that long period of menacing silence, "of making even the stoutest heart weaken, of making even the most stubborn tongue talk."

Major Brane shrugged his shoulders. "Naturally," he said. "I hope you are not so stupid as to think that I would overlook that fact, and not take steps to guard against it."

"Such as?"

"Such as seeing that the check was placed entirely out of my control before I returned."

"Thinking that would make you immune from—persuasion?" asked the bearded man mockingly.

Major Brane nodded his head. "Thinking you would not waste time on torture when it could do you no good, and when your time is so short."

"Time so short, Major?"

"Yes. I rather think there will be many things for you to do, now that that check is to be made public. There will be complete new arrangements to make, and your time is short. The Nanking government and the Canton government will be forced to settle their differences as soon as the knowledge of that check becomes public property."

The bearded man cursed, bitterly, harshly.

Major Brane sat perfectly immobile.

The bearded one raised his voice. "All right. Here he is. Come in."

The door of the room in which the loud conversation had taken place burst open. Four men came tumbling eagerly into the room. They were not masked. Major Brane knew none of them. They stared at him curiously.

The bearded man glowered at them. "He claims he ditched the original check in a safe place," he said. "He's clever enough to have done something that'll be hard to check up on. The check may be in the house. He may have left it in the room where he sat; or he may have picked it up

when he came in the second time, and put it some place where we'd never think to look. He's that clever.

"Search him first, and then search the house. Then take up the trail of the car. He wouldn't have taken it far. He was back too soon . . . Still, he wouldn't have left it parked on the street. He'd know we'd spot it. He must have left it in the garage that's down . . ."

Major Brane interrupted, courteously. "Pardon me, it is in the garage. I left it there and tore up the ticket. I didn't know you were here, at the time, Brinkhoff, or I would have saved myself the trouble."

The bearded man gave a formal inclination of the head. "Thanks. Now, since we understand each other so thoroughly, and since you have shown such a disposition to cooperate, there's a possibility we can simplify matters still further. We can make a trade, we two. I'll trade you the girl for the check."

Major Brane smiled, the patronizing, chiding smile which a parent gives to a precocious child who is trying to obtain some unfair advantage. "No. The check will have to be eliminated from the discussion now."

"We'll get it eventually."

"I hardly think so."

"That which is going to happen to the girl is hardly a pleasant subject to discuss. You see there are very major political issues involved. You, my dear Major, and I, have long since learned not to grow emotional over political matters. Unfortunately, some of my subordinates—or perhaps I should refer to them as associates—are still in the emotional stage. If they feel that major political issues have been shaped by the theft of a check, and that this girl is the guilty party . . ." He broke off with a suggestive shrug.

Major Brane sighed. The sigh seemed to be almost an incipient yawn. "As you, yourself, have so aptly remarked," he said indifferently, "*we* have learned not to grow emotional over political matters."

The bearded man sneered. "I thought you came here for the girl?"

"I did."

"You don't seem anxious to save her from an unpleasant experience."

Major Brane made a slight gesture with his shoulders. "I was employed to recover the check. I thought it might be a good plan to throw in a rescue of the girl for good measure."

The bearded man suddenly lost his semblance of poise, his veneer of culture. He took a swift step forward, his beard bristling, the strong white fangs behind it contrasting with the jet black of the beard.

"Damn you! We'll get that

check out of you. We'll fry you in hot grease, a bit at a time. We'll pull off the skin and stick burning cigars in the flesh. We'll . . ." He choked with the very vehemence of his rage.

This time Major Brane yawned outright. "Come, come!" he said. "I thought we had outgrown these childish displays of emotion! We are playing major politics, we two. If you have lost the check, you have lost the fight. Torturing through vengeance won't help you any."

"It'll make you suffer! It'll eliminate you from any future interference. You've blocked too many of my plans before this!"

Major Brane nodded. It was as though he considered an impersonal problem. "Of course," he muttered politely, "if you look at it that way!"

The man turned his dulled silver eyes morosely upon the others, who had been standing at sullen attention. "Search him. Then the house. Then the streets."

The men came forward. They were thorough about the search and not at all gently. Major Brane assisted them wherever he could. They pulled his pockets inside out, took away all of his personal belongings, searched his shoes, his coat lining, the lapels of his coat, under the collar.

Then they divided into two groups. One searched the house, the other group the street. The man with the beard remained with Major Brane, glowering at him, the nature of his thoughts indicated by the dark of his skin, the closed fists, the level brows.

Major Brane regarded him speculatively. "The girl is here?" he asked.

His answer was a scornful, mocking laugh.

"I merely asked," said Major Brane, "because it is so greatly to your advantage to see that she doesn't come to harm. I telephoned, of course, to friends of hers before I returned to the house."

The bearded man gave a sudden start. Despite himself, he changed color. "Yes?" he asked. "And just what do you expect her friends to do?"

Major Brane pursed his lips. "Probably," he remarked, "they would not be so unwise as to storm the house; but they are well versed in certain matters of indirection. You might have some trouble in leaving the house."

The dulled silver eyes regarded him scornfully. " You lie!" said the man who went under the name of Brinkhoff.

Major Brane made a gesture with the palms of his hands, a deprecating gesture, partially of apology.

"Sometimes," he said, "I despair of you, Brinkhoff: You have a certain shrewdness, yes. But you lack perspective, breadth of

vision; and you are unspeakably common!"

That last remark was like the lash of a whip.

"Common!" yelled the infuriated man. "I, who have the blood of three thousand years of royalty in my veins! Common, you scum of the gutter! I'll draw the sight of this gun across your cursed face! Just a taste of what you can expect . . ."

He leaped forward, swinging his arm so that the sight of the gun made a sudden, sharp arc. But Major Brane's forehead wasn't there when the gunsight swished through the air. Major Brane had flung himself backwards in the chair; and as he went over, he watched the sweep of the arm, elevated his foot with every bit of strength he could muster. The foot caught the wrist of the enraged man, sent the gun swirling through the air in a lopsided flight. The chair crashed to the floor, Major Brane rolled clear.

Brinkhoff saw his danger and jumped back. His bony, capable hand went to the back of his coat collar, reaching for the hilt of a concealed knife.

He caught the knife, jerked it out and down. The lights glinted from the whirling steel. Major Brane flung his arms out in a football tackle. For a moment it seemed that the downward stroke of the knife would strike squarely between Major Brane's shoulders. But the Major was first to reach his goal, first by that split fraction of a watch tick which seems to be so long when men are fighting for life and death, yet is the smallest unit of measured time.

The Major's weight crashed against the shins of the man with the dulled silver eyes. The impact threw him back. The stroke of the knife swung wild. The two men teetered, crashed. The man with the beard shouted, squirmed.

Outside, the hallway pounded with running feet. There were other voices calling down from an upper floor.

Major Brane swung his fist. Brinkhoff's cries ceased. Instantly, Major Brane was on his feet, as lithely active as a cat. He swooped toward the chair which lay on the floor, lifted it bodily, held it poised for a moment, and then flung it, straight through the glass of the window.

The chair smashed a great jagged hole in the glass. There sounded the crash, the tinkle, of falling glass fragments. Then the chair toppled outward and vanished into the night. There came a thud from the ground below.

Major Brane jumped for a closed door on one side of the room. He flung it open and found that it led, not to an adjoining room as he had hoped, but into a closet. The closet was well filled with stacks of papers,

papers that were arranged in bundles, tied with tape.

Major Brane leaped inside, scrambled atop the bundles, pawed at the door, trying to get it closed. He had but partially succeded when he heard the door of the room burst open, and the sound of bodies catapulting into the room.

Of a sudden, the sounds ceased. That, reasoned Major Brane, perched precariously atop the slippery pile of documents, would be when the others entered the room and took in the situation, the unconscious form of Brinkhoff sprawled on the floor, the window with its great jagged hole.

"Gone!" a voice croaked, and added a curse.

"Jumped out of the window . . ."

"Quick! After him.—No, no, not that way! Close the block! Signal the others! He's got fifty yards the start of us. Turn on the red lights. Hurry!

Once more, feet pounded in haste. Major Brane could hear excited shouts, comments that were called back and forth.

A small section of the lighted floor of the room showed through the half-open door of the closet. Major Brane watched that section of floor for a full two seconds, to see if there were any moving shadows crossing it. There were no shadows. The room seemed utterly silent.

Major Brane strove to step quietly from his perch, but a packet of documents tilted, slid. Major Brane flung himself back, lost his balance, put out his arms, and crashed through the closet door into the room.

Brinkhoff lay sprawled on the floor. A man was bending over him, and that man had evidently been in the act of going through Brinkhoff's pockets when Major Brane, catapulting from the closet, had frozen him into startled immobility.

He looked at Major Brane, and Major Brane took advantage of his first moment of surprise. He rushed. The man teetered back to his heels, jumped backward in time to escape the momentum of that first rush. Major Brane landed a glancing blow with his left. Then he caught himself, turned, and lashed out with his right.

He realized then that the man with whom he had to deal was one who was trained in jujutsu. Too late he strove to beat down the other's left. It caught his right wrist; a foot shot out; a hand darted down with bone-crunching violence.

Major Brane knew the method of attack well enough to know that there was but one possible defense. To resist would be to have his arm snapped. The hands of the other were in a position to exert a tremendous leverage against the victim's own

weight. Major Brane therefore did the only thing that would save him. Even before the last ounce of pressure had been brought to play upon his arms, he flung himself in a whirling somersault, using the momentum of his rush to send him over and around.

He whirled through the air like a pinwheel, crashed to the floor. But even while he was in midair, his brain, trained to instant appreciation of all of the angles of any given situation, remembered the gun which had been kicked from Brinkhoff's hand.

Major Brane whirled, even as the flashing shape of his opponent hurtled at him. His clawing hand groped for and found the automatic. The other pounced, and the automatic jabbed into his ribs.

"I shall pull the trigger," said Major Brane, his words muffled by the weight of the other, "in exactly one and one-half seconds!"

The words had the desired effect. Major Brane had a reputation for doing exactly whatever he said he would do, and the figure that had been on top of him flung backwards, hands elevated.

Major Brane, still lying on the floor, thrust the gun forward, so that it was plainly visible.

From the yard, outside the window, could be heard the low voices of men who were closing in on the spot where the chair had thudded to the ground.

"Don't move!" said Major Brane.

The man who faced him, twisted back his lips in a silent snarl, then let his face become utterly expressionless.

Major Brane smiled at him. "I wonder," he said, "what you were searching for, my friend?"

The man made no sound.

"Back against the wall," said Major Brane.

The man hesitated, then caught the steely glitter of Major Brane's eye. He backed, slowly. Major Brane raised himself to his knees, then to his feet. His eyes were almost dreamy with concentration.

"You want something," mused Major Brane, "that Brinkhoff is supposed to have on him; but you don't want the rest of the gang to know that you want it. You'd yell, if you were really one of them, and take a chance on my shooting.—The answer is that you're hostile. Probably the others don't even know you're here."

The man who stood against the wall had been breathing heavily. Now, as Major Brane summed up the situation, he held himself rigidly motionless, even the rising and falling of his shoulders ceasing. It was as though he held his breath, the

better to check any possible betrayal of his thoughts through some involuntary start of surprise.

Major Brane moved toward the unconscious form of the man who went under the name of Brinkhoff. From outside came a series of cries; rage, surprise, disappointment, shouted instructions.—The attackers had found that they had been stalking only a chair that had been thrown from a window.

Major Brane remained as calmly cool as though he had ample time at his disposal.

"Therefore," he said, "the thing to do is to search until I find what you were looking for, and . . ."

His prisoner could stand the strain no longer. Already the thud of running feet showed that the others were coming toward the house. The man blurted out in excellent English:

"It's in the wallet, in the inside pocket. It's nothing that concerns you. It relates to another matter. My government wants it. They'll kill me if they find me, and they'll kill you. Let me have the paper, and I'll show you the girl."

Major Brane smiled. "Fair enough," he said. "No, don't move. Not yet!" His hands went to Brinkhoff's inside pocket, scooped out the leather folder, abstracted a document. The man against the wall was breathing heavily, as though he had been running. His hands were clenching and unclenching. A door banged somewhere in the house, feet sounded in the corridor. Brinkhoff stirred and groaned.

Major Brane paused to cast a swift eye over the documents which he had abstracted from the leather folder. He smiled, nodded.

"Okay," he said. "It's a go. Show me the girl."

"This way," said the man, and ran toward a corner of the room. He opened a door, disclosed another closet, pressed a section of the wall. It opened upon a flight of stairs.

Major Brane followed, taking care to close the closet door after him. He could hear the sound of steps dashing down the corridor, the sound of confused voices shouting instructions.

The man led him down a winding staircase, to a cellar stored with various and sundry munitions and supplies. The house was a veritable arsenal, on a small scale. He crossed the storeroom, opened another door; and Major Brane, half expecting that which he was to find, came to an abrupt pause and took a deep breath.

The Chinese girl sat in a chair. Her arms and legs were bound. The clothing had been ripped from her torso, and there were evidences that her captors had been trying to make her talk. But

she was staring ahead of her with a face absolutely void of expression, with eyes that glittered like lacquer. She was not gagged, for the room was virtually sound proof.

The girl surveyed them with eyes that remained glitteringly inexpressive, with a face that was like old ivory; but she said nothing.

The man who had guided Major Brane to the room pulled a knife and slit the bonds.

"Devils!" said Major Brane. The man with the knife turned to him. "I have done my share. From now on, it is each man for himself. They have the entire block well guarded. I can't be bothered with the woman. Give me the paper."

Major Brane tossed him the wallet.

The man dashed from the room. "Each man for himself.—Remember!" he said as he left.

Major Brane nodded. He picked up a ragged remnant of the girl's clothing, flung it over her shoulders, looked around for a coat.

From the cellar he heard a voice calling.

"He is down here, with the girl!"

It was the voice of the man who had just guided Major Brane to the torture chamber. The Major nodded approvingly. The man had warned him; it was to be each man for himself; and the devil take the hindmost. The one who had guided him to the girl felt that he stood a better chance to escape if he guided the enemy to Major Brane. That would lead to conflict, confusion and a chance for escape. It was the strategy of warfare.

Major Brane heard the men running, coming pell mell down the stairs which led to the room. And the block was surrounded, guarded. They were many, and they were ruthless. Here, in the heart of San Francisco, he had stumbled into a spy's nest, perhaps the headquarters for the lone wolves of diplomacy, the outlaws who ran ahead of the pack, ruthlessly doing things for which no government dared assume even a partial responsibility.

Major Brane stepped out into the cellar. He could see a pair of legs coming down the cellar stairs.

Major Brane observed a can of gasoline. The automatic he had captured barked twice. One shot splintered the stairs, just below the legs of the man who was descending, caused him to come to an abrupt halt. The other shot ripped through the can of gasoline.

The liquid poured out, ran along the cement floor of the cellar, Major Brane tossed a match, stepped back into the room which had been used as a

torture chamber, and closed the door.

From the cellar came a loud *poof!* then a roaring, crackling sound.

Immediately, Major Brane dismissed the cellar from his thoughts and turned his attention to the room in which he found himself. The girl had arranged the clothing about her, had found a coat. She regarded him with glittering eyes and silent lips.

Major Brane pursed his lips. There seemed to be no opening from the room; yet he knew the tpye of mind with which he had to deal, and he sensed that there would be an opening.

The crackling sound was growing louder now. Major Brane could hear the frantic beat of panic stricken feet on the floor above. Then there was an explosion, followed by a series of explosions, coming from the cellar. Those would be cartridges exploding.

Major Brane upset a chest of drawers to examine the wall behind it. He picked up a hammer and pounded the cement of the floor. He cocked a wary eye at the ceiling, studied it.

The girl watched him in silence.

The fire was seething flame now, crackling, roaring. The door of the room in which they found themselves began to warp under the heat.

Major Brane was as calm as though he had been solving a chess problem, over a cigarette and cordial. He moved a box. The box didn't tip as it should. It pivoted instead. An oblong opening showed in the wall as the swinging box moved back a slab of what appeared to be solid concrete.

A fire siren was wailing in the distance. There were no more sounds of running feet above the torture chamber.

An automobile exhaust ripped the night. There were heavier explosions from the seat of the fire; then a terrific explosion that burst in the warped door. An inferno of red, roaring flame showed its hideous maw. Heat transformed the room into an oven. The red flames were bordered with a twisting vortex of black smoke.

Major Brane gave the inferno a casual glance, stood to one side to let the girl join him. She walked steadily to his side, and together, they walked along the passage, climbed a flight of stairs.

They came to what appeared to be a solid wall. Major Brane pushed against it. It was plaster and lath, and doubtless swung on a pivot. Major Brane had no time to locate the catch which controlled the opening; he lashed out with his foot, kicked a hole in the plaster. When he looked through the opening, he was

peering into a room, furnished as a bedroom. It was deserted.

His second kick dislodged the spring mechanism which controlled the door. The section of plastered wall swung around. Major Brane led the girl into the room, Brinkhoff's automatic ready at his side. They walked through the room to a passage.

The open door led to the night, revealed a glimpse of the street outside, which was already crowded with curious spectators, showed firemen running with a hose. But Major Brane turned in the other direction.

"This way," he said. "It will avoid explanations."

They ran down the corridor, toward a rear exit. Major Brane recognized the stairs which led to the garage. He piloted the girl toward them.

In the garage she paused, looked about her. There was a wooden jack handle lying on a bench. The girl stopped to pick it up.

Major Brane grinned at her. "You won't need it. They've all ducked for cover," he said.

The girl said nothing, which was as he had expected.

A fireman came running down the alley, motioning calling instructions to other men, who were dragging a hose. He glanced sharply at Major Brane and the girl.

"Get outa here!" he yelled. "You're inside the fire lines. You'll get killed, sticking your noses into danger zones."

Major Brane bowed apologetically. "Is this the danger zone?" he asked, wide-eyed in his innocence.

The fireman snorted.

"It sure is. Get out!"

Major Brane followed instructions. They came to the fire lines at the corner, turned into a dark building entrance. Major Brane peered out, whispered to the girl.

"We don't want to be seen coming out of this district. The thing to do is to wait until they run in that second hose, then slip along the shadows, and . . ."

He sensed a surreptitious rustle behind him. He turned, startled, just in time to see the jack handle coming down. He tried to throw up his hand, and was too late. The jack handle crashed on his head. He fought to keep his senses. There were blinding lights before his eyes, a black nausea gripping him. Something seemed to burst in his brain. He realized it was the jack handle making a second blow, and then he knew nothing further, save a vast engulfing wall of blackness that smothered him with a rushing embrace.

When next he knew anything, it was a series of joltings and swayings, interspersed with demoniacal screams. The screams grew and receded at regular intervals, split the tor-

tured head of Major Brane as though they had been edged with the teeth of a saw.

Then he identified them. They were the wails of a siren, and he was riding in an ambulance.

A bell clanged. The screams died away. The ambulance stopped, backed. The door opened. Hands slid out the stretcher. Major Brane groaned, tried to sit up, was gripped with faintness and nausea. He became unconscious again.

The next thing he knew, there was a bright light in his eyes, and something soothing on his head. He felt soft hands patting about in the finishing touches of a dressing.

He opened his eyes. A nurse regarded him without pity, without scorn, merely as a receiving hospital nurse regards any minor case.

"You got past the fire line and into the danger zone," she said. "Something fell on your head."

Major Brane had presence of mind enough to heave a sigh of relief that the Chinese girl had taken his automatic with her. To have had that in his possession when he was found would have necessitated explanation.

"A Chinese girl told them about seeing you try to run past the line, when something fell from a building," said the nurse. "Her name's on record, if you want a witness for anything."

Major Brane grinned. "Not at all necessary," he said. "'I was simply careless, that's all."

"I'll say you were," said the nurse, helping him to sit upright. "Feel better?"

Major Brane slid his feet over the edge of the surgical table.

"I think I can make it all right, he said.

She helped him to a chair, gave him a stimulant. Fifteen minutes later he was able to call a cab and leave the hospital. He went at once to his hotel.

He brushed past the clerk, who stared at his bandaged head curiously; he took the elevator, went to his own room. He fitted a key, opened the door. The smell of Chinese tobacco assailed his nostrils.

"Do not turn on the light," said a voice, and Major Brane recognized it as that of the old Chinese sage who had started him upon his mission.

Major Brane hesitated, sighed, walked into the room and closed the door.

"I came to give my apologies," said the old man, a huddled figure of dark mystery in the darkened room, illuminated only by such light as came through the transom over the door.

"Don't mention it," said Major Brane. "I was careless."

"But," said the sage, "I want you to understand . . ."

Major Brane laughed. "I understood," he said, "as soon as I saw the jack handle coming

down on my head. The girl had the check hidden, and she wanted to get it right away. She couldn't be certain that my rescue wasn't merely a ruse on the part of her enemies. I didn't have anything to identify me as having come from her friends. Therefore, it was possible that her enemies, seeing that torture would do no good, had staged a fake rescue, hoping to trap her into taking her supposed rescuer to the place where the check was hidden. I should have anticipated just such a thought on her part."

The old man got to his feet.

Major Brane could hear him sigh.

"It is satisfying to deal with one who has understanding," he said.

Major Brane saw him move to the door, open it, saw the hunched figure silhouetted against the oblong of light from the corridor.

"She had dropped the check in the waste basket by the side of her desk when she knew her theft was discovered," said the old man, and closed the door.

Major Brane sat in the darkness for some seconds before he turned on the light. When he did so he saw two articles on the table near which the old man had sat. One was a white jade figure of the Goddess of Mercy, a figure that was carved with infinite cunning and patience, a figure that thrilled the collector's heart of Major Brane. Instantly he knew that it was something that was almost priceless. The second object was a purse, crammed with bills of large denomination.

Major Brane inspected the jade figure with appreciative eyes, touched it with fingertips that were almost reverent for a full ten minutes before he even thought to count the currency in the purse. The amount was ample.

Then Major Brane undressed, crawled into bed. He got up an hour later, took ten grains of aspirin, and drifted off to sleep. He awoke in the morning, jumped from bed and pulled the morning paper out from under the door.

Headlines announced that representatives of the Cantonese government had consented to consult with Chiang Kai-shek at the international port of Shanghai, the object being to patch up their internal difficulties so that China could present an unbroken front to her external enemies.

Major Brane sighed. It had been a hard night's work, but the results had been speedy.

On his way to breakfast, he encountered the night elevator operator.

"There was an old Chinaman who called on me last night," he said. "What time did he come in?"

The operator stared at him

with wide eyes. "There wasn't any Chinaman came in while I was on duty," he said.

Major Brane nodded. "Perhaps," he said. "I was mistaken."

When he came to think of it, the Chinese sage would never have left a back track which could be traced to Major Brane. Doubtless the events of the preceding night had been such that no man and no government wished to be officially identified either with their success or failure.

Major Brane was a lone wolf, prowling through a diplomatic danger zone; but he would not have had it otherwise.

NEXT MONTH –

THE BRAZEN SERPENT
by **R. AUSTIN FREEMAN**

HANDCUFFS DON'T HOLD GHOSTS
by **MANNING COLES**

WHO KILLED THE DRAMA CRITIC?
by **VAL GIELGUD**

THE ART LOVING MR. LISTER
by **JULIAN SYMONS**

HOMICIDE—HOT OFF THE GRIDDLE
by **STEWART STERLING**

and

VENDETTA FOR THE SAINT

A NEW SAINT SERIAL by LESLIE CHARTERIS

— in the December 1963 THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

the dead men laughed

by Lawrence G. Blochman

DETECTIVE-SERGEANT Pete Potrero hoisted his potbellied dignity from the police car, stroked his three chins, and pushed his broad-brimmed Stetson back from his dewy brow as he contemplated the goat path that led from the dead end of the Telegraph Hill ant-run to the murder scene. He belched softly, and the effluvia of onion, oregano and chile evoked fond memories of his cousin Dolores Maria Hermosa's chicken enchiladas which he had reluctantly abandoned in mid-tasting when the call came. He climbed the path.

He had heard something of the Haunted House of Telegraph Hill before this night. It was a three-story relic built Lord-knows-when on the precipitous north slope—drop would be a more accurate description—of that historic height overlooking San Francisco Bay. It hung on the edge of a sheer cliff, it had a fine view of Alcatraz, and it was an architectural symposium of the worst features of the late Nineteenth Century—hip roofs, turrets, gingerbread, storm doors, dormers, colored-glass skylights.

Detective-sergeant Pete Potrero, last met in Lawrence G. Blochman's THE SPECTRE OF RUSSIAN HILL (SMM. Jan. 1963) returns in this new story of the big broad-shouldered Yaqui with the dark eyes of the born cop. Mr. Blochman is a past National President of the Mystery Writers of America.

When Potrero arrived puffing on the scene, he found four characters already assembled in front of the Haunted House: There was Carl Henry, Homicide Squad detective who had arrived soon after the squad car; Jay Willard, owner of the Haunted House but who would not live in it; Old Man Freemis, janitor for several apartments on the nearest auto-navigable street, who looked after the Haunted House; and Dr. Manson, who lived at the dead end of the naivgable street. There was also the deceased, who was sprawled head-down on the steep, carpeted stairway of the ancient house.

Pete Potrero listened to their stories, then announced: "I don't believe in ghosts."

"I don't believe in ghosts either," said Dr. Manson, "but the man's dead. You can't argue that away. He's dead."

"Musta been a pretty hefty ghost that killed him," said Sergeant Potrero. "Damn near busted his head open. Look."

The dead man was a clean-cut, sandy-haired fellow of about thirty. His forehead had been horribly crushed by something blunt and heavy. The blood which concussion had forced from his eyes and nose had dried on the grimacing face.

Freemis and young Willard remained near the open front door while Potrero was examining the corpse. Potrero knew about their silly reluctance to enter the house at night.

As Potrero straightened up, another pleasant reminder of Cousin Dolores Maria Hermosa's chicken enchiladas puffed out his lips.

"Who is this guy anyway?" he demanded. "That ghost of yours must of frisked him. Not a single thing in his pockets to identify him."

"All I know," piped Old Freemis, "is his name is Boggs or Groggs or something like that. He must be from outa town because nobody from around here would want to rent *this* house and *he* did. Least he said he did. He come here with a key he got from Loudon, that real estate agent down on Montgomery Street, and even after I told him about Old Man Willard's ghost, he still wanted to see the place. He—."

"Who found the body?" Potrero interrupted.

"I did," said Jay Willard, running his long white fingers nervously through his hair. "I came up to the house while Freemis went for the doctor."

"What's the idea of going for a doctor before you even know what happened?" Potrero demanded.

"I knew what happened," Freemis insisted shrilly. "It always happens that way—as soon as they stop laughing."

"Laughing?"

"Sure. This Boggs—or Groggs—was laughing his fool head off," Freemis said. "He hadn't been inside the house ten minutes when he started laughing and whooping and hollering like crazy. We could hear him clear outside there. And I said to Mr. Willard here, I said, 'He's come back. Your poor old dad's come back again tonight and the stranger's done for.' Then he stopped laughing and I went for the doctor."

"The body was right here on the stairs like this when you found it, Mr. Willard?" Potrero asked.

"That's right," Willard said. "I saw him when I opened the door. I didn't come in. I didn't have to. I could see he was dead."

Detective-sergeant Potrero pushed his Stetson over one eye and scratched the back of his head. If Willard had been at the front door all this time, there was a chance that the murderer was still in the house. "Unless he used a window, or the side door," he said aloud. "Carl," he added to Detective Henry, "you and me are going to have a look through the house."

"Don't do it, gents," Freemis pleaded. "The Old Man ain't easy in his grave tonight."

Potrero turned his flashlight on the old janitor. Freemis had one glass eye that did not quite match the blue of his good eye and which looked off at a crazy angle as it glittered under the flashlight.

"Freemis," said the sergeant, "you hop to a telephone and call that real estate agent that gave the late Mr. Boggs the key to this house. Tell him to get over here right away if not sooner. Carl," he addressed the homicide detective, "did you say you're not afraid of ghosts?"

Detective Carl Henry grinned. "I didn't say that," he said, "but I sure ain't afraid of any ghosts I might meet around here tonight." He slapped his shoulder holster affectionately.

"Then you check the inside, upstairs and down," said Potrero, "while I take a squint at the doors and windows from the outside. We'll meet here when you're done. I forgot to phone the coroner."

Nobody remembered who had first built the Haunted House of Telegraph Hill, but the last man who actually lived in it was a retired dentist named Willard who came to California from somewhere in the Middle West, and who had moved his chair and drills into the basement and filled an occasional cavity or pulled a tooth from time to time until the day he died. After his death, which was about a year before Pete Potrero found himself looking at window sills and examining overgrown beds for

footprints, his son Jay Willard had come from art school in Paris and began remodeling the house. He was going to convert part of it into a studio, but he never did.

The carpenters had been in the house only three days when Jay Willard was found lying on the stairway one midnight, a deep gash across his forehead, laughing and babbling like a madman. He had been delirious for two days, but he recovered completely. He could never explain what had happened to him, although Freemis, the caretaker, claimed to know exactly what had happened. He had seen the same phenomenon himself: the ghost of Old Man Willard walking down the halls at night, clad in his white dentist's smock, holding a candle in one hand and swinging a huge pair of forceps in the other.

Young Jay Willard always laughed uneasily when Freemis told this story, but he never slept in the big house after that. He went there in the day time to paint—he had set up his easels in the sitting room which had a north light—but he lived in a furnished room in the next block. And he had put up the house for sale.

There were no buyers. Prospects invariably shied off when they heard Freemis's story of Old Man Willard's murderous ghost.

Then just a month ago Old Man Willard's nephew from Chicago who had plenty of family sentiment and tax free securities arrived in San Francisco to look at the house. He liked the location, said something about perhaps tearing down the old place and building a modern apartment house on the site. He laughed at the haunted-house stories, and to show his contempt for them, made arrangements to sleep in his late uncle's bed. He had carried his luggage upstairs, shouted goodnight to his cousin Jay, Old Freemis and Loudon, the realtor, and blown out the candles. (The electricity was not turned on.) Later that night he had been heard laughing insanely by himself.

Next morning he had been lying on the stairs, dead—the front of his skull bashed in.

And now this stranger, Boggs. Three dead, one wounded.

"Damned funny," said Potrero to himself as he shone his flashlight along a window sill.

"Any luck?" asked Dr. Manson, who had been following the detective sergeant's investigation with great interest.

"Nope. By the way, Doc, are you the one who signed Old Man Willard's death certificate?"

"That's right."

"Is it true that he died the same way as these others?"

'Hardly," said Dr. Manson. "True, Willard was found lying on the stairs, and he had bruised

his forehead in the fall. But his death—and the fall—were caused by cerebral hemorrhage. Apoplexy. He'd had a slight stroke the week before."

"Do you think Freemis is crazy, Doc?"

"He's a little queer," the doctor replied. "I wouldn't say he was crazy exactly."

"Think he's crazy enough to commit murder to save his job as caretaker here? If the place changed hands or was torn down, the job would go, of course, and he's pretty old to go job hunting."

"He'd have to be crazy to do anything like that, of course," Dr. Manson said. "This caretaker job is not his only source of income. He's a janitor for several other houses. Still, old people do get to feeling insecure sometimes. But I'm not a psychiatrist, you understand."

"I understand. Doc, you've lived in this neighborhood for quite a while. Right?"

"Over twenty years."

"Didn't anybody ever have the idea of tearing down the old house and putting up modern apartments before Old Man Willard's nephew got the idea?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact Loudon has had the idea in mind for some time. He was talking of forming a syndicate."

"And did you have shares in the syndicate, Doc?" Potrero suddenly shone his flashlight in Dr. Manson's face.

The doctor laughed, but his cold gray eyes did not blink under the glare.

"Are you trying to suggest that I've been playing ghost?" he asked.

"You didn't answer my question, Doc? Did you own shares in the syndicate?"

"The syndicate had not yet been formed."

"But Willard's nephew was offering more for the house that the syndicate was planning to pay?"

"You'll have to ask Loudon about that," said Dr. Manson. "That's him coming up the path now."

Loudon was a tall, cadaverous-looking man with buck teeth and dark, deep-set eyes.

"Sergeant," he said in a deep bass voice after Potrero had introduced himself, "Freemis phoned me that prospect of mine just got himself killed. I warned him about the people that got themselves killed in that house, but he just laughed. Lucky he left me his card before he—"

"Let's see it!" Potrero snatched the pastboard oblong from the real estate agent's fingers. The card read:

JOHN L. BOGGS
Special Agent
Federal Bureau of Investigation
Department of Justice

"Shades of my sainted Tio Pape!" exclaimed Potrero. "A G-man. Now what the devil—"

"He said he wanted to rent a furnished place in this neighborhood for a month or so," Loudon explained. "And he heard this place was available, so—."

"Where's the nearest phone?" Potrero interrupted.

"My office is just at the foot of the path," said Dr. Manson. "I'd be glad to go—."

"You stay here," Potrero said. "You'll all stay here! Gimme your key, Doc."

Potrero had a brief conversation with Bert Lambert, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's San Francisco office. He learned little except that Boggs, the dead man, had been working with the Immigration people in San Diego on a matter of phony visas and forged passports being presented by immigrants coming in from Tia Juana, and that he had just arrived in San Francisco, running down an apparent clue. Lambert was very much upset by the news of Boggs' death. He'd be there as soon as he could drive over from Berkeley.

As Potrero neared the top of the goat path that led back to the "haunted house," he stopped short. He felt his scalp crawl, his blood turn to ice water. From somewhere in the house came a wild, inhuman laugh. It was a long, mirthless peal of laughter that was somehow not like laughter at all. It was a little like a shriek, a little like the lugubrious baying of a coyote. He had heard the sound once before when, as a rookie cop, he had escorted an insane man to the asylum at Patten. The sound seemed to have no relation to Carl Henry, yet it came from the upper floor of the house where he had sent Henry to prowl. It must be Henry!

The mad laughter swelled again, then died in a long-drawn-out sob. After that silence.

Potrero hurried his steps, arrived puffing on the small stoop of the house. Quickly his flashlight swept the faces there, as he mentally called the roll. Every face bore a taut, fearful expression. The pale, esthetic brow of Jay Willard was spangled with sweat. Old Freemis's one good eye bulged with horror, a horror accentuated by the grotesque unconcern of the off-blue glass eye. Loudon's thin lips were drawn back from his buck teeth in a grimace of surprise and disbelief. Dr. Manson's hand trembled as he tried to light a cigarette.

"It's happened again!" wailed Freemis. "Your pal! He's the only one ain't here! I warned him. I warned you all that Old Man Maynard ain't easy in his grave tonight."

"Inside!" Detective-sergeant Potrero whipped out his gun.

"Inside the house, everybody. And if anything's happened to Carl Henry—"

"'I ain't a-goin'," wailed Freemis. His teeth were chattering. 'I ain't—"

With his chubby left hand Potrero grapped the old caretaker by the scruff of the neck, lifted him clear of the floor, kicked open the front door, and propelled the old man inside.

"Any more conscientious objectors?" Potrero asked.

There were none. Like scared sheep, the assembled cast of characters huddled into the front hall.

Stepping in behind them, Potrero paused, his gun in his right hand, his flashlight in his left. His flashlight beam slashed through the darkness, rippled up the carpeted stairway. The corpse of John Boggs, the dead G-man, still lay there—alone, thank God! Despite all his skepticism of Freemis's ghost stories, Potrero had half expected to find Carl Henry's body lying there beside that of the FBI man.

"Who's got lights?" Potrero demanded.

Only Willard and Dr Manson had flashlights.

"I . . . I'll go with the doctor," said Loudon.

"I'll stay right here," whined Freemis. "You'll need somebody to watch the front door."

"I got two squad cars down there in the street," said Potrero, "and I'll call on them if I need them. You, Freemis, will come with me. Willard, I want you in the dining room and kitchen. Doc, I want you and Loudon in the living room and study. Come on, Freemis."

Potrero and the old caretaker climbed the stairs. The mad laughter of a moment ago had not been repeated. A thick, ominous silence flowed through the dark, musty house. Only the creak of flooring and the whisper of footsteps on the ground floor disturbed the still darkness.

Potrero pushed Freemis ahead of him as they examined the bedrooms, one after the other. The furniture, shrouded in dust covers, loomed like specters under the restless, glaring eye of the detective-sergeant's lamp. There was no sign of Carl Henry.

Pete Potrero rubbed his three chins as he emerged into the upstairs hall. There was something funny about that hall, but he couldn't tell what. He had noticed it before, but he could not analyse his impression that there was something wrong. He paced the length of the corridor, then went down the back stairs—the servants' stairs, they had undoubtedly been, when the house had been built and all self-respecting San Franciscans had servants. What the hell (and the seven saints of Santa Barbara de las Siete Lagrimas) had happened to Carl Henry?

"There's . . . there's the basement," suggested Old Freemis in his uncertain treble.

So Potrero tried the basement which underhung the main body of the house like an afterthought sprawling across the bottom of a page. The basement stairs were thick with dust but the detective sergeant went down anyhow. Carl Henry had to be somewhere.

Potrero's light picked out a ponderous furnace and a pile of coal in a nearby bin. The coal was gray with dust. Also gray with dust was Old Man Willard's abandoned dental-clinic equipment which had been shoved into a corner of the basement. Obviously the dental chair had not been touched in many months, and spiders had spun webs from the tall drill standard to the instrument cabinet.

"Say, Freemis," Potrero began, "when did—?"

He stopped. He turned suddenly. Freemis was no longer beside him. From the floor above came the sound of running footsteps, confused exclamations. He hurried up the basement stairs. Just before he reached the top, he heard a loud, startled shout.

Potrero pursued the excited voices into the dining room. All four men were there. Jay Willard, Dr. Manson and Loudon were standing in front of an open window, staring in horror at something outside. Old Freemis stood a little apart from the others, his lips moving in silent prayer, his good eye shut tight, ghastly, unseeing blue of his glass eye leering at Potrero through half-open lids.

Potrero crossed the room in three bounding strides, elbowed the others out of the way. Just outside the open window he saw, lying in a clump of shrubbery, the motionless figure of Homicide Detective Carl Henry. Henry's face was wet with blood. Just above his eyes was a wide streak of crimson pulp. In an instant, Potrero had straddled the sill, jumped into the shrubbery.

Tenderly he gathered his bow-legged little friend into his great arms, lifted him, stretched him gently on the ground. Henry still lived. Little bubbles of bright red froth that came and went between his lips showed that he still breathed. But Pete Potrero knew by the horrid snoring sounds that came from Henry's throat and the blood trickling from his ears that his skull had been crushed beneath the ugly welt on his forehead.

Dr. Manson was crouching beside Potrero now, examining the unconscious detective with his flashlight.

"Can we move him, Doc?" Potrero asked. "At the hospital —maybe—"

The doctor shook his head silently.

Potrero looked down at Henry. As he watched, his friend's hands slowly turned to wax. Even before Dr. Manson spoke, he knew that Carl Henry was dead.

For a long moment the detective sergeant crouched motionless beside the body of his friend. Then he began to swear. And as he swore, his stunned grief flamed into a burning, purposeful anger. It was no ghost that had killed Carl Henry: it was a fiend. And by all hell and the seven saints of Santa Barbara de las Siete Lagrimas, Pete Potrero would get that fiend before the night was out!

Eagerly, bitterly, Potrero examined Henry's body for possible clues. He found broad, pink smudges on the inside of both dead hands—some pink powdery substance that rubbed off easily and gave off the faint odor of calcimine.

Potrero next looked for Henry's gun. It was still in its holster. *Puta de putas!* Potrero swore to himself. What was the meaning of this? Carl Henry attacked from the front—the ugly wound was on his forehead—without even pulling his gun? Why? There wasn't a man north of the Tehachepi quicker on the draw than Carl Henry. Why was his police positive still in its holster?

Detective-sergeant Pete Potrero arose to his roughly square five-feet-six. "Gents," he announced to the four men watching him in silence, "a delegation from the FBI should be here in twenty minutes or so, and somebody from the coroner's office might be here even sooner. Before they get here, I intend to have the bracelets on the SOB that killed Carl Henry, ghosts or no ghosts. I'm telling you this, just in case one of you wants to save himself trouble and maybe the risk of getting shot . . ."

He paused. No one spoke. His flashlight beam swept the four faces, then went out.

He backed away a few steps and looked up at the dark-looming mass of the house. Protruding from the sloping roof were two dormer windows. Quickly he moved to the other side of the house. There were two more dormer windows on that side. He frowned into the darkness. Suddenly he exclaimed: *Madre de Dios!* He thought he had the answer.

He hurried down the goat track to the parked car that had brought him and Carl Henry to Telegraph Hill. He unlocked it and began rummaging in the back seat where they kept emergency equipment: extra ammunition, a sawed-off shotgun for close-in work, a box of gas grenades . . . . Potrero soon found what he was after and stuffed it under his coat. It made a large, queer-shaped bulge when he buttoned the coat.

He puffed his way back up the

hill, elbowed his way through the puzzled reception committee, and climbed directly to the second story.

He went through all the bedrooms again. He paced the upstairs hall. This time he knew what was wrong with the hall. It was too short. Two rooms opened off of one side and three rooms opened off the other. From the outside of the house there were four dormer windows. From the inside only three rooms had dormer windows. There must be a room sealed off somewhere.

Potrero stepped into the bedroom at the short end of the hall. He examined the walls. They were papered with a gaudy flower pattern. Disappointing. He opened the closet door—and his heart beat increased suddenly from 76 a second to 110.

The closet walls were covered with pink calcimine. He ran his hand over the surface. A pinkish smudge stuck to his fingertips. The scent was hot. Carl Henry had been here before he was killed.

Potrero began working his way around the closet walls, pushing with his free hand. Was he imagining it? Or did the far wall give a little? He pushed again. The wall swung inward, like a door. He stepped through the opening. The wall swung shut behind him.

His flashlight revealed that he was in a small cubicle, about six feet square at the most. The walls and the ceiling were bare, except for the heavy spring that had forced the wall door shut behind him. He ran his fingers along the corners, seeking some crack by which he could open the door again. He found none. He pushed against the four walls in succession. They were unyielding.

He was trapped.

Gradually he became aware of a faint, steady, hissing sound. He listened, trying to locate the source by ear. The hissing seemed to come from all directions, as though he were surrounded by geese.

He sniffed. He could detect no odor of gas—only a sweet taste at the back of his tongue. There were no fumes swirling in the beam of his flashlight. Yet he felt a sudden wave of giddiness surge over him.

Again his flashlight explored the walls of his prison. This time it picked out something he had not noticed before: an oblong steel grille in the baseboard, like a furnace register.

As he started across the room toward the grille, he felt his knees flex under him. He reeled a little. He was strangely lightheaded. An uncontrollable feeling of exhilaration welled up in him, as though he had been drinking Sangritas at his Cousin Benito Juarez Calderon's bar

south of Market Street. He want-to to laugh, to shout!

He had guessed right, then! Nitrous oxide—laughing gas! But he had forgotten that the old stand-by anesthetic of dentists had no color or odor. Had he remembered too late? The hissing seemed very far away . . .

He tore open his coat, snatched the object that had made it bulge. In a few seconds he had adjusted the gas mask to his face. He breathed deeply.

He sat down on the floor, breathing regularly and rapidly, surprised and delighted to find that he was not losing consciousness. Apparently he had not inhaled enough of the anesthetic to put him out. He continued to fill his lungs deeply, greedily, until he felt his head clearing.

The laughing gas was still hissing through the opening in the baseboard. Potrero stooped to see how it worked. He shone his light through the metal lattice of the register and saw a cylindrical tank with a tapering snout, the sort of container in which the liquidified gas is sold to dentists. He also saw batteries, an alarm clock, and a system of levers connected with the petcock on the tank. Evidently opening the wall-door turned on the gas automatically and the lock turned it off when the proper dose had been administered.

There was a click. The hissing stopped.

Potrero snapped out his flashlight. He would not have long to wait now. He drew his legs under him, raised himself to a crouching position. Then he drew his gun. Every nerve taut, every sense alert, he remained poised, peering into the darkness.

After a few moments he heard a faint rasping sound. A narrow strip of dim gray light split the darkness in front of him.

The rasping sound came again. The strip of gray widened. The opposite wall was sliding back. The gray strip was expanding more rapidly now. When it became an oblong it was blotted out by the silhouette of a man.

Potrero's tense muscles uncoiled. He tore off his gas mask, sprang at the shadow.

There was a grunt as his shoulder collided with flesh and bone. At the same moment something heavy crashed down across his back.

We winced with pain as he grappled with his adversary. He felt hard, powerful muscles moving under his desperate grasp. The man had one arm free to swing his heavy bludgeon. The sledge-hammer blows still punished Potrero's back and shoulders.

The detective-sergeant's superior weight forced his enemy backward into the larger room.

With incredible agility, the quick, wiry body wriggled free.

Potrero raised himself to one knee, leveled his pistol in the direction of the hoarse, panting sound in the darkness, squeezed the trigger.

His ears roared. Jagged flame spewed from the muzzle—once, twice!

Missed!

The heavy bludgeon crashed down on Potrero's knuckles. The gun exploded harmlessly once more, then spun from his stunned, aching fingers. He could hear it sliding across the floor.

Again Potrero lunged, grappled with his man, went down in a clinch. He rolled over, trying to avoid the flailing, battering bludgeon. His left hand grabbed a cold, rough, metallic bar, hung on. His right closed into a fist, rained rabbit punches on the nape of his adversary's neck.

The killer's grasp relaxed. Potrero snatched the weighted club free, swung it. A swift fist cracked against the sergeant's jaw. The bludgeon slipped from his fingers, banged against the wall.

A knee jabbed viciously into his groin. A great wave of exquisite pain submerged him. When he resurfaced, the killer's clawlike fingers were fastened to his throat.

Potrero fought frantically to pry the strangling hands from his neck. In vain. The killer's grip held like the jaws of a steel trap. His thumbs gouged the sergeant's windpipe.

Potrero gasped. Strange noises tortured his ears. Or was it the wailing of distant sirens? The pressure against his windpipe increased.

His brain swam dizzily. Flashes of light danced before his eyes. Or were those headlight beams striking through the dormer window, swinging across the ceiling? No matter. He could not hold out much longer. Or could he? He had never been licked yet . . .

With a gargantuan effort he heaved his voluminous body to the left, raised his right thigh clear of the floor. His right hand dragged a pair of handcuffs from his hip pocket.

An instant later the steel shackles clicked around the strangler's wrists. With a cry of rage the killer sprang up.

Potrero sucked air noisily into his burning lungs, wrapped his arms firmly about the killer's ankles and hung on.

Ax blades slashed through the false wall at the end of the corridor. A portable floodlight sprayed a white glare through the shattered partition. Uniformed police with tommy guns piled into the room, followed by Federal men and Bert Lambert, local FBI chief.

"Hello, Bert," said Petrero weakly, grinning through bruised lips. "Glad you dropped in. You won't need your riot gear,

though. I got everything under control."

Lambert was looking about him in amazement. The sealed room was a shambles. A small printing press and two cases of type had been upset. The floor was littered with engraved copper plates, pied type, steel dies, cans of printers' ink, stacks of little green-covered booklets resembling American passports—and a bloody sash weight.

Detective-sergeant Pete Potrero was looking at the three men who had come timidly into the room behind the forces of law and order. "Well, Freemis," he said. "I caught your ghost for you."

Freemis's good eye stared incredulously at the manacled wrist of pale, bleeding, dishevelled Jay Willard.

"Young Mr. Willard?" Freemis exclaimed shrilly. "Why it can't be him. Mr. Willard was with us when Mr. Henry got killed."

"He was not," said Potrero. "Willard was with us when Carl Henry walked into that trick gas chamber and got his lungs full of nitrous oxide. Then while you and I were in the basement and Loudon and Dr. Manson were in another part of the house, Willard rushed upstairs and killed my pal while he was still unconscious from the laughing gas—killed him with that sash weight there, pushed him through the dormer window and dropped him into the shrubbery."

Lambert, the FBI chief, went up to the manacled, sullenly-silent Willard and scrutinized him closely.

"Willard is the man John Boggs was after, all right," he said. "Boggs had spotted the man in San Diego—obviously Willard's agent—who was peddling forged American passports to immigrants waiting for visas in Tia Juana. Boggs' job was to find the man who made the passports. Looks like he was too successful."

"But surely," Dr. Manson objected, "Jay Willard wouldn't kill all these people over just a matter of forged passports!"

"No?" Lambert smiled grimly. "Phony U.S. passports sell in Tia Juana for a thousand dollars up. In Hong Kong they bring double that. Willard had a half-million dollar business, tax free, to protect. I've known men to kill for a lot less."

"But Willard himself was a victim . . ."

"Fake victim," Potrero corrected. "He wasn't hurt bad, you remember. And he staged his part-time insanity act to bolster Freemis's haunted-house stories—anything to keep people away from the premises where he was practicing the arts he learned in Paris—copper-plate etching and steel engraving.

"And to keep people from getting too curious about this room he's sealed off to work in, he

arranged a little reception room where the inquisitive visitor would get knocked out by laughing gas. Then Willard would bash their heads in with a sash weight and drag their bodies to the staircase—to match Freemis's ghost stories. He had to change the pattern with Carl Henry because the house was full of people."

"What put you onto Willard, Pete?" Lambert asked.

"Well . . ." Potrero mopped the blood-tinged sweat that was trickling down his swollen bronzed cheeks into the creases of his multiple chins. ". . . when I saw Carl was killed from the front without drawing his gun, I knew he must have been unconscious. When I spotted Old Man Willard's dentist's paraphenalia down-cellar, I remembered the time I got a tooth pulled once and the dentist gave me laughing gas to put me under. And I remembered too that Carl Henry was laughing like a fool all by himself before he died. So all I did then was to go get me gas mask and look for a room with a dormer window that doesn't show from the inside. Say Bert, will you do me a favor?"

"Sure, Pete. What?"

"Well, I know you got a call on the prisoner on Federal charges, but— Well, Carl was a good friend of mine, and I'd kind of like the privilege of booking Willard for Murder One. And maybe later I could take him across the bay to Quentin . . ."

"He's yours, Pete," said Lambert.

The quick clutch of Detective-sergeant Potrero's fingers on Jay Willard's arm had the finality of a clutch of cyanide eggs.

NEXT MONTH –

THE STORY BEHIND TOMORROW'S HEADLINES!

THE OPENING CHAPTERS OF THE FIRST FULL-LENGTH SAINT NOVEL IN 20 YEARS!

THE SAINT TAKES ON THE MAFIA AND CHALLENGES THE OVERLORDS OF CRIME

in

VENDETTA FOR THE SAINT

THE NEW SAINT NOVEL by LESLIE CHARTERIS

the sensitive

by Avram Davidson

THE WOMAN with the two suitcases rang the front bell. She rang it two more times, then peered through the glass door, shading with her hand against her own reflection. What she could see of the hall through the lace curtain looked like the hall of any old-fashioned private house—a carpet which might have been any color from brown to red, a desk with a telephone and a telephone book, a hat-rack, a rubber plant, a window with a window-seat which undoubtedly opened up to disclose a recess filled with old books, galoshes, and used dust rags; and part of a staircase. After a few minutes during which her finger hovered impatiently at the bell, a pair of legs began to descend the stairs which vanished from sight before the torso could come in view. The woman drew back her face from the door, composed it into a suitably grave smile.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the man said, having opened the door.

"Your sign says *Rooms To Rent,*" she got down to business

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immediately. Her voice was vigorous, her face pink, her hair grey and curly. "May I bring my grips inside and look at them—the rooms?"

"Why, uh, sure. Just put them down there, no one will bother them. I'm Mr. Moehble. I—my wife and I—this is an owner-operated place, we run it, only since she went to visit her folks I've been taking care of it myself." He blinked at her.

"Looks very nice."

"Well, I have a colored woman in to help me."

"I want two rooms, Mr. Moehble, and I prefer that they be adjacent."

He started for the stairs, hesitated, started to wave her ahead of him, then proceeded as before. Over his shoulder he asked, "Two rooms? How many people?"

On the second floor she said, "There's just myself. But I will be having visitors, nothing for you to worry about. I keep things quiet and I keep them clean, but naturally I do not want to receive my visitors in my bedroom."

A somewhat distressed look came over his face. "Well, uh, they all *have* beds in them, ma'am. All the ones for rent, I mean."

She laughed, slightly impatient. "I suppose a bed can be moved out, can't it?"

The owner-manager, having considered this suggestion, admitted that it would be possible. He groped for keys, found them, fitted one into a door, started to open it, turned around again. "Uh—you want—they have to be adjacent?"

"If possible. If at all possible. You can see how much more convenient it would be for me. I haven't told you my name. I'm Reverend Ella Kinderhook." After a pause, she said, "I can see you're not very familiar with Spiritual Wisdom, never mind, you aren't the only one—lots of light in here, that's good, I never was one to work in the dark like some I could name—public ignorance is appalling. Not for myself, I don't care about that, but, oh, well. *Anyway.* Reverend Ella Kinderhook, I'm a well-known Sensitive, some people prefer the old-fashioned term, Medium, but that makes no difference. There are very good vibrations in this room, happy people lived here, didn't they? I can always tell. And the other room?"

This presented certain difficulties. The adjacent room was occupied, occupied by a Miss Ferenzy, a lady of a certain age, who came and knocked on the open door while the discussion was going on. Miss Ferenzy was pleased at the idea of having another lady on the floor, and she said that she would be willing to move to the room across the hall from Mrs. Kinderhook's bed-

room—if the landlord would charge her a little less, it being slightly smaller than her present quarters. Mrs. Kinderhook said that she thought this was only fair, she appreciated Miss Ferenzy's offer, and inasmuch as Mr. Moehble was renting two of his rooms at once to a reliable tenant she had no doubt that he would be willing to make such a slight adjustment; also, to move the bed out of the other room not later than tomorrow.

He seemed slightly confused, but both ladies assured him that he would not regret having consented. So he gave in. He also consented to what Reverend Ella, backed by Florence Ferenzy, pointed out was the customary ten percent clerical discount.

"*Well,*" said the new lady, after he had gone, "shall we have a little prayer together? I never embark on a venture such as this without it. Give me your hand, my dear." Afterwards she told her, "The vibrations here are generally good. I say, 'in general,' because there are intruding elements, very faint, though, I'm glad to say. Don't you feel them? No? Well, you're not a Sensitive. Fortunately, very faint."

Mr. Moehble proved as good as his word. He and Lilac, the cleaning woman, took the extra bed apart and moved it and the mattress up to the attic. Reverend Ella obtained the loan of a sofa for her sitting-room, and the small table which was in one corner she moved into the center. She hung up suitable pictures and bought a number of potted plants and generally fixed the place up to suit herself, and very nicely, too. A small announcement appeared in the evening newspaper: *Reverend Ella Kinderhook, Spiritual Wisdom. Consultations, by appointment only,* TR 1-5672. There were calls, visitors, soft music played upon a little phonograph, and people who had passed over spoke to their loved ones through the person of the Sensitive, Reverend Ella Kinderhook.

Miss Ferenzy and Lilac were both very intrigued by all this, and did their best to make the interesting new resident feel at home and comfortable.

"Do you cure crossed conditions, Reverend?" Lilac asked.

"Only if they are of a spiritual nature, dear. A woman came to me not long ago, said she had a back-ache. A back-ache! Well! *I* told her, 'You had better go see a chiropractor.' The idea."

Mr. Kinderhook, also a cleric, also a Sensitive, had passed over some years earlier, and the Board of their little church had elected his widow to fill his place. Unfortunately, a few months ago, dissension had begun to arise in the ranks of the

faithful. Litigation was threatened—followers of the lady pastor had urged her, too, to resort to the law. But she said No. Where there were bad vibrations, she didn't wish to remain. She would not be the focal point of hostility. All that she asked was that certain items of church furnishings which she had bought with her own money and had the receipts to prove it should be given back to her for her own future use. And she had left.

"What made you come here, Ella?" Miss Ferenzy asked. "To this city, I mean?"

The only answer that her friend could tell her was that, consulting a map and engaging in prayer, she had felt called to come to her present location. Eventually, if there was made known to her a need for it, she might organize a church here—a branch of the Spiritual Wisdom movement. That wasn't up to her, however. She was just an instrument.

Lilac told of a spiritual experience she herself had once had. She used to do day work for a family named Morris. Mrs. Morris the elder had a son and daughter-in-law who lived in another city. When old Mr. Morris died this couple had come to the funeral and after the meal which followed the funeral the daughter-in-law, Janet (Mrs. Tom) Morris had helped Lilac do the dishes. And the second time they had met was when Mary Morris, the unmarried daughter, died; and again Lilac and this lady had done the dishes together.

"One night, maybe about a year later, Reverend, I had this dream, and what was it but I was washing dishes and this same lady, Janet Morris, she was drying them. I woke up and I told my husband. And while I was talking to him about it the telephone rang and who was it but my missus, old Mrs. Morris, and she was crying and crying. So I knew it was something very bad; when she told me, 'Oh, Lilac, please come over right away, Tom has died suddenly, 'I said to my husband: 'Oh oh. My dream. Sure enough.'"

Mrs. Kinderhook nodded, unsurprised. "Depend on it, you can depend on it, it was a Message, all right. Very probably, Lilac, you have the talent to be at least a partial Sensitive yourself, only it remains latent because you haven't developed it. That's why you only came into contact with the other plane in a dream, you see."

Lilac reflected on this, and then recalled, with some resentment, that she had told this same story to Mrs. Moehble and Mrs Moehble had laughed at her. "What are you, some kind of a nut, or something? So you had a dream," was her reaction.

Miss Ferenzy was scornful. "Oh, that one! She wouldn't give you the time of day if she could help it. The last conversation I had with her, before she left, I complained that Frank Foley, that big lug, you remember him, Lilac—I complained to her that Frank Foley was always using up all the hot water for half-hour shower baths, and you know what she said to me? The nerve of her! 'Too bad about you,' she said. Oh, believe me, that one can stay as long as she likes and I wish her family joy of her."

"Lilac! Florence!" Mrs. Kinderhook called up the stairs. "My things have come — my church things—that I told you about. The expressman just left them. Come down."

Lilac exclaimed over the big boxes, wondered where they would be able to put them. Miss Ferenzy was curious about what was in them.

"Choir robes, for one thing," Reverend Ella said, happily, her eyes shining. "We had a vested choir—oh, they are just beautiful! Of real satin! And Bibles and hymnals and copies of *Preparation For The Power Of The Spirit*, that's our book of meditations, you know. And a beautiful hand-carved mahogany lectern and a set of drapes and a silver communion set with serving trays and glasses. Vestments for the ministers and servers. And, oh, many other good things. Now, dear friends, where shall we store them until they may be needed? There wouldn't be room, really, in my rooms."

The attic was suggested, but the thought of carrying everything up all those stairs was too discouraging. Besides, Lilac said, there might not be room. The cellar? Mr. Moehble wasn't home, but Lilac led them slowly down the steps to the basement, and they waited at the bottom while she fumbled for the light. "You have to know just where it is," she said. Then the light went on and they blinked and looked around.

Miss Ferenzy said, "Oh, there's plenty of room down here, isn't there, Ella? Lilac? Don't you think so?"

"Looks like it to me," Lilac said.

Mrs. Kinderhook did not reply, so Florence turned around, inquiringly. To her shock she saw her friend swaying on her feet. "Ella!" she cried, alarmed. "Ella! what's the matter? Are you sick? Oh, help me, Lilac, help me get her upstairs—"

Mrs. Kinderhook's face was putty-pale, and her lips trembled. She sat, heavily, in the kitchen chair to which the other women helped her. Lilac ran for aromatic spirits of ammonia, but when she returned with them Mrs. Kinderhook seemed better,

had a tremulous smile, and said she had rather not take any artificial preparation — "But thank you, Lilac, dear, anyway."

"Ella, if you're *sick*—" Miss Ferenzy began.

But her friend shook her head. No, she wasn't ill in any physical or material sense. "It's the cellar," she said. "How could you not feel it? Oh, it's bad down there . . . it's very bad. Such dreadful vibrations! Such an aura! I sensed something wrong, something wrong about this house—Florence, you remember—I said that there were intruding elements, but very faint ones—didn't I? Well, you see, they were coming from the cellar. From the basement. I don't know where I am going to put my things, dear, perhaps I'll have to warehouse them, though I hope not. The money. But one thing I *do* know: I shall—Never—Go into—That basement—Again! In my Life!"

Her resolution impressed, her attitude was contagious. The two other women exhanged glances, then—picking up courage from each other's presence—plied Mrs. Kinderhook with questions; the same question, really, rephrased slightly. What was it she had felt down there, down in the cellar? What was it? What was so wrong, so terribly wrong there?

At first the Spiritual Wisdom minister shook her head and compressed her lips. But she lacked the present strength to hold out against their insistence. Finally, with a gesture, she silenced them in order that she might herself speak. They wet their lips, waited.

She shook her head again, but in a different manner—not for negation, but for emphasis. Her voice was dry, soft, hesitating, but not hesitant. "I have met death . . . what people call 'death', people of imperfect understanding, I mean . . . I've met it in a hundred different ways. I've known when it was coming. I've been laughed at for it. But I was right, you see. It's a sense I have, if you don't have it, you can't understand it. A blind person can't understand sight, can he? And I've been in places where I knew at once that someone had passed over from that place, knew it at once. Well, when that person was prepared, it's different. You're aware of calmness, acceptance. Even joy, sometimes, if the state of spiritual development was advanced enough.

"But sometimes the vibrations are, well, sick. Sick with fear. Sick with unresolved conflict. Ignorance. Hostility. Oh, I just—It's *wrong* of me, I know, but at times like this I just wish I'd never been *born* with it!"

She began to weep. Lilac patted her hand, pushed a glass of water to her. But Florence Fer-

nezy, having swallowed once or twice, said, "Emma. Emma . . . are you trying to tell us . . . Is there—Emma? A dead person in that cellar?"

Reverend Ella sipped her water. Her face tightened. "Not in the cellar, dear. Not *in* it. Voice down to a whisper, she said, "*Under* it."

Florence gave a little scream. Lilac rolled up her eyes, clasped her hands. "Oh, Lord!" she said, softly. "Oh, Lordy! Yes. *Yes,* Miss Ella. You must be right. A dead body under that cellar? Well, and I know who, too. I *know* whose body—". Her hands loosened their grip on each other, shot across the table, grasped Florence's. "*And so do you know!*"

Miss Ferenzy stared, aghast and agape. The muscles in her loose cheeks quivered. Then she cried out, returned Lilac's tight hold. "Oh, yes. Yes, I do! Oh, I see it now! Oh, that poor man! What he must've gone through! Ella, Ella—I never wanted to tell you, I never liked to spread gossip, and particularly with you a minister, but—that woman! And he found out! Lilac! She was playing around with Frank Foley! Wasn't she? Wasn't she playing around with Frank Foley?"

"Frank Foley?"

"And he found out, he must've found out!"

"Frank *Fo*ley? You name him, ence Ferenzy told Mrs. Kinderin the house that ever wore pants!"

Between them, Lilac and Florence Ferenzy told Mrs. Kinderhook of the scandalous life of Mrs. Ernest Moehble, a little bit of a thing but what a temper she had. Always roving. Dressed fit to kill. Didn't like to put her hands in dishwater. Thought she was really something. The husband is always the last one to find out. Oh, what a terrible thing. What were they going to do?

What were they going to do?

Nobody, then or later, would admit having told anyone else. Let alone called the police. But somebody must have. Somebody certainly must have. Because Florence and Ella were in Ella's sittingroom, and Ella had just noticed that the big picture of Lily Dale, the Spiritualist summer colony, was a little bit crooked; she just got up to straighten it when the detectives knocked on the door.

She couldn't tell them anything about Mrs. Moehble. She'd never in her life laid eyes on the lady. And Miss Ferenzy didn't see fit to tell everything *she* knew. Not quite everything. . . .

"And you never saw her leave, then, ma'am?"

"No. No, I never did."

"Pack? You ever see her pack?

No. She ever tell anyone she was going to leave? Not that, either, eh."

No . . . all that anyone knew was that one day she wasn't there, and her husband said she'd gone to visit her family. Sick mother, not expected to live. But — Mr. Moehble had said—not expected to die right away, either. . . . When was this? Oh . . . Oh, over a month ago. Maybe two months. It was just about the time that Frank Foley moved—

Only (the clever questioning of the police revealed) *no one had ever seen Frank Foley move, either!*

Rumors flew from floor to floor, from house to house. The police made another visit, the police seemed to have moved in for good, the police searched the whole house. In the attic they found Frank Foley's belongings. The Moehbles' closets were still packed tight with Mrs. Moehble's dresses, hats, shoes—everything. Mr. Moehble, always in the company of police, plain-plainclothed and uniformed — Mr. Moehble, pale, confused, wretched—Ernest Moehble admitted at length that he had lied, that the reason the police were unable to locate his wife's mother in the city he said, was that his wife's mother had been dead for years. It was all a lie, intended to cover up the truth. And what was the truth? The truth was that his wife had run off with Frank Foley, he said.

That was the truth.

Why hadn't they taken their clothes and other things with them?

He supposed it was because they'd run off on an impulse.

The police inquired the reason for part of the cellar floor having been recently cemented. "It was cracked. And besides, I wanted to get my mind off things," said Mr. Moehble.

The police obtained a court order and began digging up the cellar.

"I can't tell you a thing," Reverend Ella Kinderhook told the very blonde young man and his grey-haired partner. "I never met that unfortunate lady, she had moved out before I moved in. I told the other policemen that."

The very blonde young man said that they weren't from the police. "We're from the newspapers, Mrs.—uh, Reverend. You put an ad in with us, remember? My name is Joe Hovaness, this is Fred Coyle. We're very pleased to meet *you*. Now, you know, there's a rumor — we've had a few phone calls—that you were the one who first got the idea of the wife being buried under the cellar. Is that right? You had a vision or something?"

No. She shook her head. "I mentioned no name. I sensed no

name. I sensed the vibrations." And she told them about it.

"*Hot* dog!" the reporter exclaimed. "And the Chief doesn't know this yet, huh, Fred?"

"Or the Commissioner," Fred said, suddenly producing a camera.

Mrs. Kinderhook said, "I named no names." She was very calm.

She remained calm, the calmest one in the house, when the shouts sounded from the cellar. Lilac came running up the stairs as the reporter and photographer went dashing down them. "Oh, Lord, Miss Ella! They found them! They found their bones! Two skeletons, side by side! Oh, Lord!"

She threw herself into the minister's arms. "There is nothing to fear, Lilac," the Reverend said. "But I think that we should say a little prayer." They prayed, they put on a phonograph record — Reverend Ella, Lilac, and Florence Ferenzy — and they sang hymns. They continued singing them as the police dug up the third, the fourth, fifth and sixth set of bones. They were still singing

The flesh is but a husk of clay,
The portal through which we all must go.
This we have learned, and this we know—
Beyond, is Everlasting Day."

—for the radio and television people, as well as for themselves, when informed of two pieces of remarkable information.

Mrs. Moehble and Frank Foley had been found, alive, annoyed, and quite intact, enjoying a morgantic honeymoon in a motel near Toledo, Ohio.

Mr. Moehble was not a mass-murderer. The bones, someone at City Hall had belatedly discovered, were those buried in an old Potter's Field on the site of which the house was built ("People were lax in them days," the unnamed spokesman said, shrugging), and which had been closed and forgotten a hundred years earlier.

The crowds ebbed, the police departed, reporters and radio-TV men went away. For a short while the house was very quiet. Then a large automobile drove up to divulge a large woman, who puffed her way up the stairs. "Oh, Reverend Kinderhook!" she exclaimed. "Do you remember me? Mrs. Aaron Whittaker? We met at Lily Dale the summer before," she paused for breath; "before my dear husband passed over."

"Oh, yes. Yes, Mrs. Whittaker."

"I heard—I just heard—what a wonderful testimony! What a lesson to scoffers! Reverend Kinderhook, you must allow me—this is no place for you. We'll hire a hall, we'll build you a

church. Aaron left me well off. Say you will."

Mrs. Kinderhook smiled. "I knew that I was called here for a purpose," she said. Looking up, she saw someone go by in the hall—slowly, slowly. "Oh, Mr. Moehble," she called.

He paused, did not look up.

"I am so very sorry for you. But it must be all for the best, if you could only bring yourself—"

The man flung out his arms. "Everybody knows, now," he said. "Everybody knows. The whole world knows now." He started to move away.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "Shouldn't you try to rest?"

He shook his head. "I got to go down to the cellar."

"To the *cellar?*"

His voice floated back to them. "She might come back," he said. "She might get tired of him. I wouldn't want her to find the place in such a mess."

THE MYSTERY OF THE CRITERION HOTEL PLAQUE

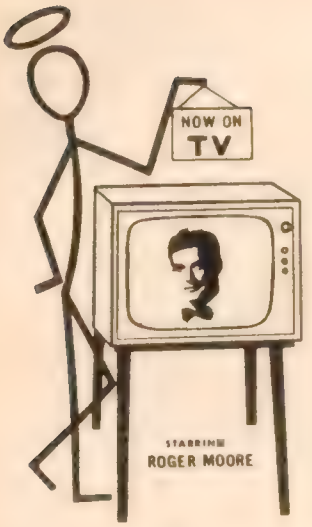
Early on Derby Day in 1956 two or three men approached the Criterion Hotel in Piccadily Circus and examined the plaque of heavy oak and sheffield steel which had been unveiled in January 1953, just outside the main entrance to the Hotel. The plaque read simply:

This plaque commemorates the historic meeting early in 1881 *at the original Criterion Long Bar of Dr. Stamford and Dr. John H. Watson which led to the introduction of Dr. Watson to Mr. Sherlock Holmes.*

There are conflicting reports on what next happened and on whether these men who were seen examining the plaque actually committed the crime—one report has it that they were seen driving away with it in a car — another "witness" insists that the plaque was still there when they left. But, by mid-morning, visitors coming there to take photographs of the plaque, were dismayed to find that it had been removed. It was to take seven years before the members of the Sherlock Holmes Society, the group responsible for the plaque, were to learn that the plaque had been located, appropriately, in the East.

Richard Hughes, chief Banto of the Baritsu Chapter of the Baker Street Irregulars (Tokyo and Hong Kong), which numbers among its members many distinguished men including former Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, was able to report in the London *Sunday Times* for August 4, 1963, how he had the honour of arranging for the preparation and exhibition of the plaque. "It is now my responsibility to restore it to London in consultation next month with the Sherlock Holmes Society."

There is still no word on the identity of the criminals and on what finally led to the discovery of the plaque, so far away from home. At the time of writing we also do not know precisely where, in the new Piccadilly, the plaque will finally be placed. We hope to report on this soon.



LESLIE CHARTERIS'

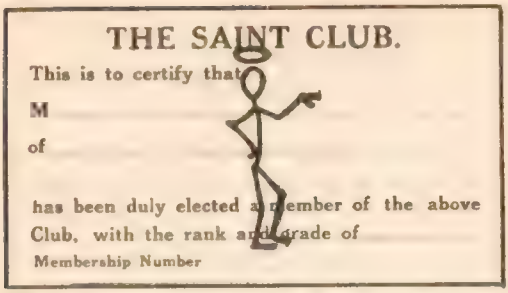
The saint on TV

ROGER MOORE Joins The SAINT Club...

Roger Moore, currently starring in the TV series, "The Saint", now on TV from coast to coast, has become a member of the Saint Club which sponsors a Youth Club in Stepney, one of the toughest areas of London, run by the Reverend Prebendary C. E. Young. The main source of income for the Club comes from the readers of the Saint stories.

There was so much interest in a Saint fan club that Leslie Charteris formed it soon after the war. Subscriptions and donations of members, after deducting running expenses, were at first sent to the Invalid and Crippled Children's Hospital in Plaistow where for many years the Club maintained an 8-bed ward. Since then, the funds have been transferred to the Arbour Youth Club in Stepney, an overpopulated area of East London where facilities for recreation are almost non-existent. The Club is run on a home-from-home basis and Saints are welcome to visit it any Tuesday or Friday after 8 p.m., to see the young people enjoying healthy recreation.

The Saint Club, the sponsor of the Arbour Youth Club, is unique. The rules were drawn up by Leslie Charteris himself. They lay down that all matters concerned with the administration of the club, blackballing of members, blackballing of non-


THE SAINT CLUB.

This is to certify that

M

of

has been duly elected a member of the above Club, with the rank and grade of

Membership Number

NOTE TO THE POLICE.

The bearer of this card is probably a person of hideous antecedents and low moral character, and upon apprehension for any cause should be immediately released in order to save other prisoners from contamination.

Front and Back of the Saint Club Membership Card.

members, embezzlement of funds, etc., shall be in the hands of a permanent committee of six members appointed at the discretion (if any) of the Vice President (Leslie Charteris), who need not pay any attention to them anyway. Any one member may form a quorum, or anything else he can think of. The permanent Committee consists of Patricia Holm, Roger Conway, Monty Hayward, Peter Quentin, Hoppy Uniatz, and Sam Outrell. The "Legal Adviser", Superintendent Mott, C.I.D., a Scotland Yard official, works closely with the Youth Club officials.

"Persons eligible for membership shall consist of all males and females of any age, sex, colour,

Roger Moore photographed at the entrance to the Saint Club.

Leslie Charteris, Vice-Pres., Saint Club

Roger Moore at the Saint Club.

and parentage with or without criminal records.

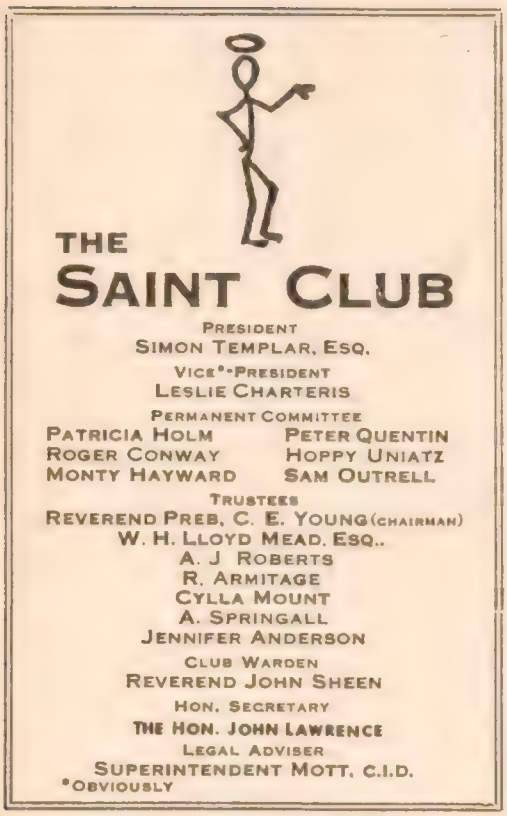
"Those who fail to renew their subscriptions when due shall automatically become Devils.

"The badge of the Club shall be a Saint, rampant, sang. upon argent.

"Any meeting-place where two or more Saints are gathered together shall be known as a Heaven. If they start talking politics it will probably look like Hell. In any case, it will probably be called a Bar.

"Any number of Cherubs and

Roger Moore discovering that "healthy recreation" includes boxing.



Cover of the Constitution

or Saints may combine for social purposes, such as bridge-playing, stamp-collecting, elbow-lifting, Teal-baiting, knitting, dancing, eating, tiger-shoting, delousing, etc., into an individual Saint Club, which shall be entitled to apply for affiliation to the Mother Body. It shall, however, be a condition that no Saint Club shall be permitted to exist anywhere, nor may the name or insignia of The Saint be permitted to be used, in connection with any club all of whose members are not Members of The Saint Club. (Prospective Saints in the New York might perhaps meet—appropriately enough—at the Paradise Inn?)

Members are provided with a membership card which has the following notice to the police on the back: "The bearer of this card is probably a person of hideous antecedents and low moral character, and upon apprehension for any cause should be immediately released in order to save other prisoners from contamination."

Roger Moore, now sporting a Saint Club badge and tie, is obviously in good company!

The actor is handed his membership card and welcomed into the Company of Saints.

dig me a home

by William F. Nolan

THE FUNNY part of it is, I never really *liked* Larry Constantine – not even when I decided to die for him. Most of the time we were light years apart. I mean, he was never my kind. Larry didn't drink, didn't play around with women, didn't bet the ponies. None of it. He was a quiet little guy who always made straight A in school right down the line. When he got a job he held it. To Larry, a Sunday church social was a real big blowout.

Me, Al Herman, I'm a different breed of cat. I've always liked my women well stacked and my martinis very dry. When I get fed up with a job I chuck it—and that's pretty often. On Saturdays I watch the ponies run and hang one on in the p.m. which leaves me in the sack on Sunday morning with a king-sized head.

So how did I get mixed up in Larry Constantine's private world? Easy: I married his kid sister.

I was in Frisco with holes in my pocket when I met Louise. She was a receptionist for a big

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William F. Nolan, who lives in Burbank, Cal., the the author of several books on motor racing including BARNEY OLDFIELD and the upcoming MEN OF THUNDER (both Putnam's), IMPACT 20 (Paperback Library), and co-editor of a racing anthology to be published by Bantam in the fall of 1964.

manufacturing outfit and I was trying to hook a job. Told me they were full up but that she'd keep me in mind. Turned out I was the one who kept *her* in mind. I just couldn't forget that baby-sweet face of hers. When I got work, and had a few bucks to spend, I trotted back to her office and hit her for a date. She didn't say no. I found out later that she'd had a row with her boy friend and just went out with me to spite him.

A week later we were married. Just like that. When I met brother Larry he blew his stack. Called me a lousy bum and a few other choice names. Lou tried to calm him, but it was no dice. Took him three years to simmer down. I was 4F—sinus—but Larry was 1A. He spent three years with the Seabees in the Pacific and we never heard a word from him.

When he got back, though, he offered to call off the grudge and shake hands. Which was fine by me. We went to a few ball games together—about the only common interest we shared—and that, as they say, was that. Except that every second week or so Lou would have him in for steak. We got along.

Then came the accident.

I go back over it again and again in my mind, and I still can't believe that Lou is dead. It was one of those freak things you read about in the papers. They always happen to the next Joe. Only this time it happened to me.

We were driving back to Frisco after a weekend in L.A. and it was early morning and still dark. Lou had her head on my shoulder and was sleeping like a doll and I felt pretty damn good. Not loaded, mind you, but I had a glow on—and I wanted to let out the Chevy, just to see what the old bus could do. We were on that long straight run into Bakersfield, with trees lining the divided highway on both sides, and I stomped the pedal. All the way down. I remember the black needle climbing up to 90, and I thought: Hell, let's go for an even 100! So I kept the pedal to the floor.

The car *seemed* steady enough, and I still don't know exactly what happened. I figure a tire must have blown because suddenly the wheel went crazy in my hands and I just couldn't hold the Chevy on the road. We hit one of those trees head-on. God knows how I ever came out of that one alive, but I did. I was thrown clear and ended up with a broken nose and some cracked ribs.

Louise was killed instantly. She never woke up.

I expected Larry to tear me apart — and I figured I had it coming. But he didn't. He was shocked, sure, plenty shocked and hurt, but he didn't have any

hate in him. Only sorrow, a deep kind of sorrow that numbed him like a blow.

Larry told me that it could have happened to anyone; that most people drive cars much faster than they were meant to be driven. I tried to believe it. I tried to tell myself that I didn't kill Lou as surely as if I'd put a gun to her head. But it didn't work; I couldn't shake free.

Lou was the one thing in all of my life that I'd really loved completely. And I'd killed that love.

A week later I quit my job in Frisco and headed for San Diego. Just to forget. I knew I couldn't, but I had to try. For a while I worked as a freight handler and warehouseman; rough, killing work that helped to dull the pain. At night I'd drop into bed like I was stoned. But I still had the dreams. Every night I'd go into that same tree. Over and over and over.

Finally, six months later, I came back to Frisco. No real reason, I guess, except that I wanted to see some of the places Lou and I used to go when the days were good. I came back because it was just no use trying to run away.

I phoned Larry at his apartment the evening I hit town. I needed a few bucks to live on between jobs and I knew he was good for a loan. Larry didn't have to worry about being paid back; nobody's ever called Al Herman a welcher.

"Listen, Larry," I said over the phone. "I just got back and I'm flat. Can you stake me?"

"Sure, sure," he said. "C'mon over, Al."

On the way to Larry's apartment I tried to figure what was coming off. Larry's voice over the wire had told me one thing: he was soused to the gills. Which was all wrong. The Larry Constantine I'd known would never come within twenty feet of a drink.

When he opened the door Larry was smiling crookedly and weaving like an outpointed boxer in the tenth round. Loaded, but good.

"Hi," I said.

"Lo, Al," Larry mumbled. "C'mon in."

I did. The place was a mess. Dishes piled in the sink, clothes all over the floor, papers and junk scattered around. God, it looked like a two-bit flophouse. A far cry from the neat, orderly apartment that was typical of Larry.

I took a close look at him. A wilted white shirt open at the neck, unpressed trousers and a week's growth of beard.

"You been to work lately?" I asked.

Larry was a construction engineer, one of the best, and he'd never missed a day since I'd

known him. Up to now, that is.

"I—I'm on vacation," he stammered. "Have a drink, Al."

I poured myself a Scotch and water and sat down on the couch. "Okay," I said, "what's eating you up? Is it Lou?"

Larry stopped smiling. He finished his drink and dropped wearily into a chair across from me. "It's not Lou," he said slowly. "I got over that. You learn to get over things like that. Other things are not so easy."

I knew he was telling the truth. Whatever was working away at Larry Constantine had nothing to do with his sister. "Then, what *is* it?" I asked.

"Instead of telling you," Larry said, getting up from his chair, "I'll show you."

He got out his projection equipment and asked me to set the screen up. Now I'd seen plenty of Larry's color slides; photography was his prize hobby, but I knew that *this* set would be different.

And they were.

"There," said Larry, bringing the first slide into focus. "There's your answer, Al."

A very beautiful girl was stretched out lazily on a low, tomato-colored divan. Her slim, tanned arms held a Siamese above her head, and she was smiling up at the cat. She was perfection.

Another slide. The same girl, in tight green slacks this time, with her hands on her hips. And again the smile.

Larry had a dozen shots of her and each made her seem more beautiful than the last. Finally he switched on the lights—and I could see that he had sobered up fast.

"Her name is Pat," he said, and his voice was soft. "Patricia Richardson."

"And she's the sun and moon for you, eh", I said. Because it was obvious. He'd fallen; and when a guy like Larry Constantine falls, he falls all the way.

"Yes, I love her," he said. "Wholly and completely."

"But she doesn't love you," I supplied. "That it ,Larry?"

"No," he said "that *isn't* it." He began to pace the room. "Pat loves me as much as I love her."

"Then marry the girl," I told him. "It's simple. People do it every day."

Larry paused, breathing deeply. His face was pale and his eyes burned out at me. "Her full name is *Mrs.* Patricia Richardson," he said.

I shook out a Pall Mall and sat back to listen. "Go ahead."

"We met during the war," Larry told me, "in the Pacific. She was a nurse on one of the islands and when I visited sick bay with a headache she gave me some aspirin and told me I looked like I needed a girl. Funny thing for a nurse to say, and at first, I was sore. Then things

changed; we got to dating a little and I guess we both fell in love at once because suddenly those weeks turned into the happiest of my life. I was going to write Lou about her . . . but I never did. I decided to surprise you both by coming home with a wife. But it didn't work out that way." He mixed himself another drink and downed it quickly. "Pat got transferred back to the States. After she got out of the corps she met this guy, this Richardson. Fred Richardson; a fast-talking, smooth operator who swept Pat off her feet. Next thing she's writing to tell me the news: she's married. And that was that. These things happen all the time during a war and all a man can do is forget them. So I pulled down a shutter in my mind and Pat ceased to exist for me. At least, I *thought* she did."

"But you were wrong," I said.

He nodded. "Six weeks ago I ran into Pat in town. Everything went haywire. We had dinner together and it was wonderful seeing her again. We went dancing and ended up at her apartment. Fred Richardson was in New York on business and . . . Well, we . . ." he looked down, obviously ashamed of what he had to admit.

"You spent the night there," I put in.

"Yes," he said, pain in his voice. "It was wrong, I know, but it *seemed* right at the time. I knew then that I'd never be able to forget her, Al. Never."

Larry was a deeply religious man. His life had always been carefully regulated. Sin had no place in it. Then Pat had come along. It was a familiar picture.

"You can do a lot of drinking in six weeks, Al," he told me. "I found out."

"What about your job at the plant?"

"Gone, of course. They don't keep drunks around."

"I just don't know what to tell you, Larry," I said; because I didn't. In a way, he was in my boat. I'd tried to run away from a city because too much pain was there; Larry Constantine had tried to run away from himself. We'd both failed. What do you tell a drowning man when you can't swim yourself?

"Take a look at these," Larry handed me several newspaper clippings. Gossip column stuff. And they all concerned Pat Richardson's husband.

"Wow," I said. "This boy certainly plays the field."

"That dirty son of a bitch has been living off Pat's money," Larry said bitterly; and it was strange to hear him swearing. "While she works he's been sleeping with every slut in town!"

I realized, then, just how much Larry hated Fred Richardson. Even a divorce wouldn't

solve things for Larry; his religion would keep him from marrying a divorced woman. He was that kind of man. He might drink and swear, but he'd never go against his faith. I knew it and he knew it.

Larry reached for the Scotch again. "I didn't mean to unload all this on you, Al," he said thickly. "Sorry."

"I'm the one that's sorry," I told him. "I'm sorry I haven't got an answer for you Larry."

Then, suddenly, I did have the answer, the *only* answer. It was wild and it scared me just thinking about it, but I knew there was only one way for Larry Constantine. My heart hammered in my chest, sickeningly. But I had the only answer.

Fred Richardson had to die.

"Listen," I said, "it's late. I've gotta go, Larry."

"Sure," he said, and handed me some money. "Will this be enough?"

"It'll be fine," I told him. "And thanks."

He was reaching for a fresh Scotch when I left.

When I reached the street I was certain of one thing: I was going to do something for someone that really counted for the first time in my life. With a louse like Richardson out of the way Larry and Pat could live happily ever after. Sure, I'd end up in the gas chamber, but so what? My life was meaningless without Lou; living was hell and this was one way to end it neatly and simply. Besides, I'd seen plenty of guys like Richardson ruin lives by the dozen. His kind *needed* killing. This time someone happened to be around who could do the job. And I was that someone.

The only thing tougher than premeditated murder is premeditated suicide—and I was trying to do *both* at the same time. In the movies murder is a cinch. You just grab a gun, spot your victim and send a couple of bullets into him. Finis. But I found out it isn't quite that easy. I got the gun without any sweat—an old Luger. I'd had it around for years. But my nerve nearly gave out at the start.

My hands were trembling and the Luger weighed a ton under my coat when I looked up Fred Richardson's phone number in a booth at Walgren's drug store. I rang the apartment, wanting to make sure he was home. I could get by when he answered with a sorry-wrong-number routine. But he didn't answer. Just that distant ringing in the receiver.

I took a stool at the counter and ordered black coffee. I was shaking all over; the way I used to when I was a kid in the dentist's chair with that drill above my head. Little muscles were jumping in my legs and I could-

n't do anything about them. My nerve was going fast.

Two more cups of coffee and I rang the number again. And this time I got a busy signal. Which meant somebody was home. Maybe Pat alone. But I couldn't wait any longer. I had to take a chance. I had to move.

I parked my car a block away from the apartment house — which was in the hilly section of Berkeley near the university — and walked to the address.

If Richardson was home I'd know him. One of the clippings Larry gave me had contained a photo of Lover Boy and it was clear in my mind. Big, dark guy; thick-lipped with curly hair and narrow eyes. I'd know him all right.

Moving toward that apartment building, carrying the gun in my pocket, I felt strange. I was the Dark Man you're always reading about; I was Mr. Fate with a loaded Luger.

Well, I told myself, lice have to die — and Fred Richardson was a prime example of the species. So he dies.

The apartment house was a tall white building at the corner of the block. The Richardson apartment was number 6, second floor left.

The night was warm and sticky and most of the windows were up around the building. I hoped that the Richardson's was not the exception. And it wasn't.

I used the fire escape in the rear to reach the apartment. The front window was up with the shade half-drawn. It was dark inside. Whoever had used the phone was in bed by now.

The screen came off without any trouble and I swung over the wooden window ledge and onto a soft carpet, the Luger gripped tight in my hand, my heart thumping like a drum. I stood there for a long minute, letting things settle, letting the silence roll back in.

It was a large apartment, very well furnished. The rent alone, I thought, must eat up a lot of Pat's money. But maybe she's got plenty; I didn't know.

Slowly I edged toward what I figured to be the bedroom. Turned out to be *a* bedroom, one of two in the place. The door to this one was open and I could make out Fred Richardson's figure on the dark bed. I could just see his face in the filtered light from the window. Pat was probably sleeping in the other bedroom across from this one. I couldn't be sure; her door was closed.

I moved across the room slowly, the gun ready in my fist. A few more seconds and it would be over. Larry and Pat would be free.

Then I saw the stains; blending in with the dark pajamas that Fred wore and almost invisible until you got close

enough. But I was close enough.

Close enough to see that Fred Richardson was already dead.

He'd been stabbed several times as he slept, right through the thin coverlet. He lay unbreathing in his own blood.

Then I realized what had happened; Larry Constantine was a killer! The weeks of steady drinking had taken their toll. Half-crazed by the latest newspaper gossip, he'd finally cracked. He'd come to the Richardson apartment for a showdown and found Fred in the bedroom sleeping. Pat, obviously was out, had still not returned to the apartment. Larry had seen his chance and struck. Then he'd returned to his place to wait for the police. That's why he'd been the way he was; that's why he'd told me the whole story—because he wanted me to understand.

The murder weapon was on the rug in the far corner of the room: a big — bloody kitchen knife with fingerprints all over it. I knew they belonged to Larry — and so would the police once they got it to a lab. Well, they didn't have to find out. No one had seen him do it, the body was still undiscovered . . .

I wiped the handle of the knife carefully and planted my own prints on it. Then I wiped off everything I thought he might have touched, doorknobs, the windows, drawers, tables, the works. I left plenty of my own prints in their place.

Then I grabbed the phone. "Listen to me, Larry, and don't interrupt," I said into the mouthpiece. "I know what happened. I was going to try the same thing myself. Now I've got my own prints on the knife, so you're in the clear. Don't go heroic on me and confess because the cops wouldn't listen. Not with this set-up. I don't mind ending things this way. I've gone through hell since losing Lou and all I want now is to see you and Pat get a break. So sit tight till you hear from me."

The police grabbed me twenty minutes after I left the Richardson apartment. It seems that Mrs. Patricia Richardson had arrived home from a late show and seen me leaving by the fire escape. She'd taken one look into her husband's bedroom and phoned for the law.

When I came face to face with Pat I knew I'd been all wrong about Larry. The story of what she'd done was in her eyes. Murder was written there in capital letters. She'd killed her lout of a husband and I'd dropped in shortly thereafter to provide the perfect fall guy.

I didn't tell Larry the truth; he'd never have believed me anyhow. How could a sweet young doll like Pat drive a knife into her hubbby's back? That kind of thing could never hap-

pen in Larry Constantine's private world.

Larry told them that I didn't do it, but it didn't cut any ice. They had my prints—and I was spotted leaving the scene of the crime. Two and two made four.

"We'll get you out," he told me. "Eddie had a lot of enemies and we'll find the real killer. You'll be free again, Al, I swear!"

But Larry was wrong.

I didn't mention Pat during the trial. After all, I didn't have a shred of legal evidence—and somebody had to pay for killing Fred Richardson.

This is my last night. Tomorrow, in the cold and early morn, they'll be around to lead me to that little green room. Then they'll dig me a new home in the ground.

I've had plenty of time to think about Pat Richardson. I keep trying to connect that sweet, frail little gal with a knife murderess; I try to imagine her standing in the shadows watching me plant my prints on that knife — and sometimes I wonder. Maybe someone else did kill Fred Richardson. But then I remember that look in her eyes and I know.

Well, Pat and Larry are married now and I guess they'll live happily ever after.

One thing, though. I just hope one thing.

I hope Larry never tries to cross that girl.

AN EDITORIAL ASIDE

So many readers—so many friends—so many people active in this field, have all asked, over the years, whether Leslie Charteris would ever write another full length Saint novel. All I could answer was that I certainly hoped he would do so.

Like many of you, I had followed Simon Templar's adventures over the years, long before I joined this magazine (ever since *The Thriller* days, as a matter of fact). It was pleasant, in an age that seemed more and more to be surrendering to the neo-Freudian or "more realistic" school of writing, a tradition-less school of writing one might add, to read about this man who, in his bouts with the bureaucratic mind, in his harrassing of the ungodly and in his very special sense of humour, seemed to stand for aspects of the British character, rather ageless aspects one might add, that have in every generation helped to balance the doubtful contributions to history of both the Blimps and those others with whom recent headlines have made us more familiar . . .

With all this in mind, I found myself putting aside whatever I was doing when another chapter of VENDETTA FOR THE SAINT would come in the mail. I have been working in this field for the past twenty years and still there I was, anxious to see what would happen next—wondering how Simon would get out of this or that situation—but never doubting . . . I enjoyed VENDETTA FOR THE SAINT and I know you will too! And remember that this is the first publication anywheres of the first full-length Saint novel in twenty years!

H.H.S.

miracle at rios

by Hal Ellson

It was all arranged. Gonzalo Paz, ex-general and present Governor of the state, was due to meet his end sometime before midnight. Like his predecessors, his failings were many and human, but he hardly deserved assassination. He wasn't that bad, only weak, with a propensity for affairs of the heart. His enemies had reckoned well on the last.

At eleven, the usual hour, Paz arrived at the main plaza of Rios, dismissed his chauffeur and dropped into the bar-room of the city's main hotel. Three fast ones, a glance at his watch and he started for the door.

A hot night outside, the plaza was still crowded. He crossed it quickly. Soon he was walking under the enormous arches of the Municipal Building, amidst silence and shadows. Up ahead four men, all in white, sat motionless on a bench. A sombre quartet. Dozing? His heels clicked sharply on the tiled walk. The four in white didn't stir. Silence as he passed, as he entered the rear of the Municipal Building, silence again but

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Hal Ellson, author of the bestsellers DUKE and TOMBOY, and THE TORMENT OF THE KIDS (Regency), THE KNIFE (Lancer), etc. etc. again writes about the peoples met with in, NOTHING IS SIMPLE (SMM, August 1962). Here an even more distinguished man is marked for murder.

deeper in the huge patio, shadowed balconies above and the dark blue sky full of stars. It was cooler here. Thankful for that, he lit a cigarette and moved toward the stairs that led to the quarters above.

In the faint light of an ancient lamp at the foot of the stairs a watchman sat on a box like an enormous sullen idol. Obsidian-black flashed light as he raised his eyes. Otherwise he didn't move. Paz nodded, started up the stairs and the fat one spoke: "If you can spare a cigarette, Senor Governor?"

Taken aback, Paz stopped. The watchman waited, face expressionless, but insolent in his bearing. Tomorrow the fat pig would be looking for another job, Paz decided, flipping him a cigarette from his gold case and again starting up the stairs only to be stopped once more.

"Senor Governor?"

"Yes?"

"If you have a moment for a question from a man of ignorance?"

"What's the question?" said Paz, irritated by the faint note of mockery that echoed in the fat one's voice.

"People are talking of reform. What do you think of it, Senor Governor?"

"I'm all for it."

"And the people?"

"What about the people?"

"Are you for them?"

"I am, and they must be for me or I wouldn't be Governor. Does that answer your question?"

The watchman shrugged and a vague smile lit his face.

"You're new here. What's your name?" asked Paz.

"Gustavo Villa. I'm taking care for my cousin who is sick tonight."

"You know I'm expecting a visitor?"

The vague smile appeared again, tinged with insolence. "Yes, Senor Governor."

Paz mounted the stairs, entered his office and went straight to the liquor cabinet. Another weakness, but still a human one. He drank deeply, straight from the bottle, drank again and thought of the watchman, the mocking voice, enigmatic questions. The man disturbed him, his skin felt cold; he remembered the queer feeling that struck as he'd mounted the stairs —like a vague warning—but he was only half himself now with the liquor taking command of his mind. Thought of the woman coming here tonight made him gasp. Hair like the night, flesh like . . . He tipped the bottle, drank again and heard footsteps echoing on the balcony. They came on, stopped at the door. A soft knock. He opened the door and his jaw went slack at sight of the watchman.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Senor Governor, your visitor could not come. If tomorrow is all right? The boy is waiting down below for the message."

"Send him away."

There it was, the faint insinuating smile on the wacthman's face, the derisive gleam in his eyes, the oily voice spewing oily phrases: "It can't always be play. There are other things, Senor Governor. Work . . . Reforms . . . The people . . ."

The insolence of the man astounded Paz and, without meaning to be humorous, he snapped, "That kind of work is for the day."

The watchman grinned. "True," he admitted. "The night is for other things. If you are interested . . .?"

"In what?"

"A girl. Very pretty. You'll see . . ."

"Never mind." Paz was about to slam the door in the face of the fat one, and suddenly changed his mind. "Bring her here. But if she . . ."

"Don't worry, Senor Governor."

Paz tilted the bottle again, drank, wiped his mouth and waited, amused now by the situation. The fat watchman bringing him a girl. What if she's a dog? he thought, and heard footsteps on the balcony. They stopped at the door. A soft tap. He opened the door and the watchman confronted him.

"What is this? Where's the girl?"

"Have patience. She's on the way and worth waiting for. A real angel, picked especially for you."

"You're most thoughtful."

"But you deserve the best."

There it was, the touch of sarcasm, the insidious oily grin. Paz struck back in kind. "Here." He offered a small coin. The oily grin vanished, the obsidian-black eyes flashed from wells of fat. Footsteps tapping on the stairs in faint tattoo aborted the duel. The watchman stepped back, bowed and let go a parting shot: "Have a good time, Senor Governor."

He left, going in one direction, while from the other came the tapping, a sharper tattoo. The girl was on the balcony now. Click! Click! High heels, perfect timing, no flurrying. Paz smiled to himself. A shadow fell across the doorway, then the girl stepped into view.

An angel with dark hair, pale skin and enormous sombre eyes. She introduced herself. Her name was Maria. He invited her in, offered her a drink. She shook her head.

"You don't mind if I have one?"

Again she shook her head, and he lifted the bottle. When he brought it down, she was pulling her dress over her head. At

least, she wasn't shy, but when she put the dress aside, she sent him a dark nervous look.

Timid because she's new at this, he thought, miscalculating the look. It should have warned him. Instead, he tilted the bottle again, put it down, turned his back and began to undress.

Finished, he turned to the girl and was struck by the look of fear in her eyes. "Please, don't be afraid of me, Maria."

"Of you?"

Her lips curled, black eyes flashed — and the door burst open. Two men in white plunged into the room, half of that sombre quartet who'd been sitting on the bench in the shadows outside the building. Paz recognized them at once, and their intent was clear. Both carried razor-sharp machetes. Completely naked, Paz stood helpless. Maria was slipping into her dress. The executioners waited. Then one glanced at her. "All right, you did your job well. Now get out."

She left, and Paz shivered. Fate had caught up with him. An ugly way to die, he thought, eyeing the deadly machetes, and then it happened. He found himself, reached for his clothes, drew a gun, fired. The first slug went wild, the second dropped one of the would-be executioners, the third drilled the liquor cabinet and the second man panicked and bolted.

Paz followed, but the girl was still on the balcony, in the line of fire. His quarry reached the stairs and vanished. Paz kept running. A shadow loomed at the bottom of the stairs, blocking the way. The pig of a watchman. A slug ripped through his enormous belly and he collapsed in a heap as Paz raced past him into the dark patio. A blurred white figure darted across it, vanished in a stark black passage-way. Wild anger carried Paz into it and out to the tiled walk under the arcade. The blurred figure darted from the protective shadows into the street toward the plaza.

Paz stopped, took aim, fired. The man sprawled grotesquely in the gutter. Then, from the corner of his eye, Paz saw the other two in white. They rose from the bench, ugly machetes flashed. He turned on them with the gun, pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Panic swept him. The two in white were coming at him. He turned and fled toward the Cathedral, startling those in the plaza. Women screamed, men gaped. No one tried to stop him as he raced on toward the huge doors of the Cathedral.

Bars and restaurants around the plaza emptied. Word spread into the darker streets of the city.

An excited mob assembled

before the Cathedral. The police did nothing, and the mob waited in silence now while the two men in white stood at the Cathedral door in a quandary. What to do? The Governor had claimed sanctuary. The two in white began to discuss the matter.

"We can't kill him in there," said one.

"And we can't wait till he comes out," said the other.

"Sanctuary!" someone cried from the crowd.

"Hear that? If we go in, they'll put our heads on the lamp-posts."

"And if we don't, the Governor will have our heads tomorrow."

While the discussion continued, Paz shivered in the chill dark of a confession box inside the Cathedral. Sanctuary he'd claimed, but how long could it last with those bandits outside? Why were they waiting? For no good reason, he knew, and the dark box, where so many sinners had told their sins, became a trap. The first place where they'd seek him. But where to hide?

Where? he cried, and knelt and called upon San Gabriel, patron and protector of the city, for guidance. Moments later he stepped from the confession box. Far down the aisle, the faint light of a candle streaked a glass coffin where the wax figure of San Gabriel reposed.

"Forgive me. Forgive me." The whispered plea echoed and exploded in the vastness of the Cathedral. Silence followed.

The discussion outside was over. No sanctuary for the Governor. Silently the executioners entered the Cathedral. Immense shadows drowned them, silence awed them, the lust to kill jelled at sight of the distant altar, the mysterious flickering of the red sanctuary-light, the pale trembling candle-flames. Halfway to the altar, one stopped, unable to go on.

"What happened?" the one called Miguel whispered.

"This is wrong," Raul answered. "Very wrong."

"It's too late to think of that now. We're in too deep," Miguel replied and moved on while Raul stood where he was, unable to follow or retreat.

The wax figure of San Gabriel, patron and protector of the city, lay hidden between two pews. "Forgive me. Forgive me," whispered Paz, lying in the glass coffin of the sainted one. He was safe, he thought, but as the minutes passed with agonizing slowness, doubt set in. Those who sought him would stop at nothing, lift the very tiles from the floor in their search.

San Gabriel, help me, protect me, he pleaded, and the sound

froze his blood. Footsteps on the tiled floor. Closer now. Lie still, he told himself. Don't breathe.

A single candle flickered beside the glass coffin in which he lay. A light of sanctity, flame to ward off evil. Through half-closed eyes he watched it and heard the footsteps coming closer and shivered. But the candle would protect him, San Gabriel guarded him. Nothing could happen in this holy place. A vagrant breath stirred the flame of the candle, brightened it for a moment. Then a shadowy figure obscured it. As the dark closed in, Paz lost his head.

With a violent movement he heaved the glass lid from the coffin, leaped up and swung his empty pistol at the startled Miguel and cracked his skull. Still standing where he'd stopped midway up the aisle, Raul, the other would-be assassin, witnessed this startling act of violence, dropped his machete, crossed himself and fled.

"Miracle! Miracle!" he shouted insanely to the crowd outside the Cathedral. "I witnessed it with my own eyes."

"What miracle is this?" asked a man in the crowd.

"San Gabriel leaped from his glass coffin and struck my partner down. I saw this with my own eyes."

"And the Governor? What happened to him?"

There was silence, a long silence, then Paz, having placed the wax figure of his patron and protector back in his coffin, stepped through the huge doorway of the Cathedral, wearing the white trousers of the one he'd struck down and armed with two razor-sharp machetes which he raised to the crowd.

"The Governor! Long live the Governor!" someone shouted, and the lone voice swelled to a thunderous roar as the police moved in and seized the hapless Raul.

THE CASE OF THE COUNTERFEIT PENNY

Secret Service agents in New Jersey were hard at work, as we were about to go to press, on a case that will no doubt go down in history as the Case of the Counterfeit Penny.

A Newark man was arrested and arraigned for "uttering" the bad coin—for offering what turned out to be a bogus penny, a "very good copy" of a rare Lincoln penny minted in San Francisco in 1909, to a local coin collector who'd apparently become suspicious and gotten in touch with the authorities.

The actual coin, mint, not counterfeited, and never circulated, could be worth as much as a Hundred and Fifty Dollars. The coin is distinguished by an "S" located just under the date, on the front, and by the initials of the designer on the back. This particular penny, we might add, was not just another 1909 penny, worked on so that it would liken the San Francisco penny (only 484,000 were made in San Francisco that year). This coin was a complete counterfeit of the original coin. Somebody had worked long and hard at this job!

gilt complex

by Eve and Donn Spencer

CATHERINE HARRIS edged her convertible into the main street of the normally quiet beach community. Summer had just begun. Now the quiet was gone, the streets and sidewalks crowded.

The open admiration of her beauty excited Catherine. When she heard a particularly loud whistle from the sidewalk, she checked in her rear-view mirror for a hurried look.

"Hey, watch it!"

Catherine's foot shot to the brakes.

A young man with a surfboard stood his ground before her car. He suddenly came around to the side, dumped his board in the rear seat and clambered in beside her.

"I'll thank you to get out . . . why, it's Phil Redding," she ended pleasantly. She eased the car forward. "I can't believe it's you." She smiled happily. "What brings tomorrow's Gregory Peck to Elmsport?"

"Eight lines and twelve minutes of being upstaged in the Playhouse," Phil said gaily. "And if I'd known the Duke of Beres-

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Eve and Donn Spencer, who live in California, here write about a rather timeless feature of life in a leisure society which, it would seem, inevitably has in it the seeds of tragedy—if not sudden death. The only difference is that the actors not being professionals, the issues are approached more directly.

ford Dramatic Arts School was here, I'd have come down for a walk-on. So, what's with you and Elmsport, Kit?"

"'Kit'," she repeated. "It's been five years since I've heard that name." It was obvious the memory delighted her. She spotted a parking place in front of a restaurant and darted into it. "You are going to buy me a cup of coffee so we can have a long, long talk."

Once inside, she said with an impatient gesture. "Well, Phil? Bring me up to date."

After a hurried account of his faltering career, he twisted his coffee cup in its saucer and smiled.

"It doesn't sound like all that much fun," Catherine joked.

"It wasn't that. I can't help being tickled at finding you. Lordie, the crush I had on you!" He opened his arms in a mock dramatic gesture.

"I guess that's my cue to show you this," and she held her left hand out so that the large wedding ring was squarely under his nose. "That rather explains what I'm doing here and why my name isn't up in lights. Mrs. David Harris . . . and it's Catherine now, not Kit."

When she saw his troubled look, Catherine realized she had made her marriage sound especially grim. She hastened to give him a glamour-filled description of her life as one of the wealthier set in the little art colony.

Phil ran his hand through his curly hair. "This husband of yours must be quite an artist to afford the style he's obviously keeping you in."

Catherine laughed. "Phil, you are naive. Artists don't make that kind of money, but some art collectors do. And, my, *is* David an art collector! But speaking of David," she squinted at her watch, "good lord, I'd better get home for that meeting." She carefully applied fresh lipstick, then stood up as if Phil had been making her wait for him. "Oh, well, I'll probably be late as usual," she said more to herself than to Phil. "Damned Art Festival, anyway!"

"We tourists are led to believe it's a big event," Phil tried to keep up with her as she half-ran to the car.

"Well, it's the community's pride and joy . . . Phil, I've an idea! The Living Tableaux. Why not stay and take part in it? It'll open after your show closes and you have no other plans, you said, and it'll be such fun to have you around . . ."

"Hold on, Kit," he interrupted. "*What* are Living Tableaux?"

"Look, I'll explain on the way." She started the engine. "Get in, Phil, we have the light."

"On the way where?"

"To my house, silly. To the committee meeting."

She roared away from the

kerb. Phil had to shout over the rush of wind, "So, what are Living Tableaux?"

Catherine didn't answer until she had turned off the main street on to an acacia-lined avenue that twisted away from the ocean and up to a dark slope of cliff.

"The Living Tableaux make the Art Festival. See, a committee — David's chairman this year — selects well-known paintings and sculpture. Then the art is reproduced by using real people." She glanced at him. "It's staged at night," she started anew. "The way it's lighted, the audience sees a famous painting or statue reproduced life-size with live people. Since David's in charge, we could get you a leading role. There's not much money in it, but there's the publicity and you could stay with us. We have a huge place . . ."

"And your husband?" Phil asked. "He'll be delighted about an old beau crawling out of the woodwork?"

"David? Object to my requests?" The edge of excitement was gone from her voice. "Unless it gives me wrinkles, bulges or grey hairs, David likes to spoil me."

Phil was about to say something further, when the road levelled. The long, low sweeping house perched on the cliff's edge. The setting sun shaped a gold red aureole about its roof.

Stopping the car before the door, Catherine laid her hand on Phil's. "The committee makes its final tableaux decisions today. You're about to be introduced as their big break. It's simply a matter of having David say yes first. See?" With that, she hopped out of the car.

Phil murmured, "Didn't your mother ever spank you when you were a kid, Kit?"

Catherine ignored his remark. She opened the door and waited for him to follow. "Wouldn't you know it? No one is here, yet," she said petulantly, after ushering him through the entry hall. "Make yourself at home, Phil." She began scribbling some last-minute notes.

Phil wandered aimlessly, finally stopping at a drum table. He picked up a figurine and whistled. "What a beauty."

Catherine looked up absently, smiled warmly at him.

The soft light coming in through the wall of glass caught in her hair, gave her face radiance. He stayed an impulse to say something altogether tender and foolish. "I said, what is this?"

When she saw what he was holding, Catherine looked concerned. "Phil, do be careful! That's one of David's treasures. About twelve thousand dollars of irreplaceable Chinese art."

"No kidding? All that dough and it isn't even shiny. Oh, Kit,

I can't get over the miracle of meeting you again . . . you look so wonderful . . . even more wonderful," he appended, placing the figurine on the table gingerly.

"You look a bit wonderful yourself," a voice called.

A slim, boyish-looking woman in tennis clothes marched in, never taking her eyes from Phil.

"Hi, Tanya, meet Phil Redding. Phil, this is my best friend, Tanya Harkness."

Tanya looked at Phil with interest. "A welcome addition. Do you play tennis?"

Suddenly the entry hall spilled a torrent of people into the room. One woman gushed with enthusiasm, "I can't wait to see David's newest acquisition. I've heard it will make a marvellous tableau . . . oh, and who is this young man?"

Phil listened closely as Catherine introduced him around, waiting expectantly for "David, my husband."

"Well, that does it. You've met them all now, except for David," Catherine sighed.

Phil nodded. Then he saw someone staring from the shadows of a small alcove.

Tanya noticed, followed his gaze. "Aha," she cried, taking Catherine's shoulder and turning her. "There he is, Beauty. The Beast has arrived."

The man stepped into the light. For an instant he was ugly, brooding, as though he had supposed he was still hidden. In the next moment, his face was transformed. He smiled warmly to all, then went to Catherine.

She raised her face. He kissed her cheek, not dutifully, yet without passion. Then he slowly let one arm go about her shoulders. It remained there when Catherine introduced Phil.

David Harris was polite. "If you will excuse us, Mr. Redding, we do have an important meeting . . ."

"But that's exactly why I asked Phil," Catherine interrupted. "Phil's rehearsing at the Playhouse, darling, and I thought how marvellous it would be if you could talk him into taking one of the roles in the tableaux . . . you know a professional actor can add the right touch. And then we do need a narrator for the first half, don't forget. And, David darling, don't you think he'd be perfect for the painting you want as the main tableau? Hold still, everybody!" With that, she ran from the room.

She returned in seconds, carrying a painting. She held it up. It was a scene showing a group of gilded revellers preparing for a Venetian Masque.

Phil felt foolish as the group looked from the young figure in the foreground to him and back at the painting.

"He's perfect," Tanya blurted out. "I, for one, would uncondi-

tionally vote for the painting and for Phil."

The committee members all began talking at once.

Tanya raised her hand to still the hubbub. "No, there should be one condition. David, you must take the role of the masked man in the background."

David grinned sardonically. "I suppose with a mask over this," and he passed his hand before his face, "I'm not likely to spoil it for beauty-lovers."

Several of the committee pressed forward, congratulating him.

David held up his hand. "Hold on, now. Surely, I'm allowed a condition." And he pointed to Tanya. "You, Miss Harkness, must don the gold and be my partner."

"And *I* can play Venus," Catherine announced.

"Catherine," David said firmly, "I won't have you smearing gilt over your skin. One blemish and I'd never forgive myself."

"And then there would be all that time spent in the arms of our handsome Mr. Redding during rehearsals," Tanya bantered.

Phil expected the ugly man to glower, perhaps strike back at Tanya—or at himself. Instead, David seemed to be waiting for someone else to break the insinuating silence. The man's stare made Phil glance uneasily towards the door.

"But you promised I could be on the stage this year," Catherine said in a small voice.

"All right, but we're forgetting an important point." David faced the group. "The committee hasn't yet agreed to this canvas."

They all looked at one indecisively, at first, then nodded their approval unanimously.

"It's all settled, then," David pronounced authoritatively.

Still anxious to escape, Phil retreated from the group quickly, backing into the drum table. The figurine toppled on to the floor with a thump. Before he could reach it, Catherine snatched it up.

She held it before her, turning it slowly in her hands. She looked frightened. "It *is* dented, David, but only a little bit . . . we should never have left it out . . ."

"God, I feel like a clumsy oaf. I—I don't know what to say. I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Harris." Phil looked around helplessly.

David unheedingly took the finely carved figure from his wife's hands. Without so much as a glance at its surface, he walked to the fireplace and tossed it among the red embers of a dying fire.

Everyone stared unbelievingly at the flames.

Breaking the horrified silence, David said with controlled fury, "A thing of beauty has value for me only when perfect."

They were all still mesmerized by the burning figure. No one

could speak.

David said curtly, "I suggest we adjourn the meeting."

Although little had been accomplished, the group seemed relieved at the excuse to go.

Tanya hesitated a moment then offered Phil a lift into town. As they reached the door, Catherine caught up to them and asked Tanya to bring Phil for lunch the next day.

The precise stillness within the house ended as the sound of Tanya's car whined away to nothing.

"That scene had a nice homey touch, David," Catherine said acidly.

"I found a committee meeting an odd bit of timing for the introduction of past romances," he countered.

"I don't object to the women you're always bringing around. Besides, it might be fun to have someone around that hasn't been hand-picked for me."

"You know damned well those 'women' you refer to are business acquaintances."

"Oh? And what kind of business dealings do you have with Tanya?"

"Tanya? Why, she's *your* friend."

"In what way, David? I'm merely her excuse for being around you. Everyone knows that."

"Everyone knows nothing of the kind!" He seemed ready to explode.

"Well, does she play golf and tennis with women?"

"She's too good for most women. Oh, why do I let you twist things? Tanya is a good friend to both of us. She knows how devoted I am to you," he concluded in a tone belying devotion.

Catherine did not answer. Her mouth quivered.

"Jesus, you're not going to cry! You know it puffs your eyes."

"Beautiful, flawless Catherine," she said so quietly that he strained to hear. "Don't laugh, don't cry, don't feel, don't, don't! Just sit there like a perfect objet d'art," she ended, sobbing.

David fought back an answer to her sarcasm and made a lame apology when her sobs became louder.

"First you're nasty, then you think all you have to do is simply say 'I'm sorry'."

"Dammit, Catherine, your beauty *is* important to me, but you know damn well it's important to you, too."

"I'm bored with keeping myself beautiful! No tennis, no golf . . . I never have any fun!"

"If your idea of fun is to have your skin dried by the sun, your figure ruined with fatty foods and liquor, well, go ahead. I never order you . . . I only *advise* you. I never stop you from having 'fun' as you put it."

"Well, what am I supposed to do while you're off on your treasure hunts or playing golf or . . . ?"

"I can't amuse you all your waking hours. Make more friends . . . women friends. Develop some project . . ."

Catherine broke in bitterly. "Beauty rituals take most of my time." Then her voice softened. "David you're always encouraging some artist. When you sponsored Rita, she lived here for I don't know how many months. Why can't we give Phil that same opportunity? He could live here till he's . . . uh launched."

Catherine had stopped crying. She knew the surge of power David always felt when one of his artists became successful.

The next day, Phil found it difficult to control his enthusiasm when David formally invited him to be their house guest. Tanya was unusually quiet throughout lunch.

Over the next weeks, Catherine sparkled. She and David had none of their usual arguments.

After lunch one day, Catherine gaily pulled Phil away from the table. "C'mon, you've had enough coffee, we have to select the material for our costumes. See you later, you golf addicts."

David and Tanya watched them leave. He broke the silence. "I haven't seen Catherine in such high spirits in months."

"Not since her handsome young doctor got married," Tanya said cynically.

But David apparently didn't hear her. "She's showing a remarkable interest in the festival, isn't she, Tanya?"

"Well, David, I'm not so sure it's the festival. Did it ever occur to you that Phil is a very appealing young man?"

In the days afterward, David watched his wife and Phil at every opportunity. He rarely smiled. The situation might have boiled over on more than one occasion, had it not been for Tanya.

On the day a rehearsal was scheduled for five o'clock on the festival grounds, David and Phil were changing from their tennis clothes. Catherine and Tanya waited in the den.

Their conversation had skipped about, lighting on nothing for long. Tanya came to sit on the arm of Catherine's chair. "Beauty, let's be serious for a moment. It shows. Your infatuation with Phil."

Catherine said nothing.

"Every time your handsome protege walks into the room, your face lights up like Chloe meeting Daphnis. If I can see it, so can David."

"Tanya," Catherine exhaled wearily, "Phil and I have fun together, like you and David do."

"We don't look at each other the way you and Phil do. And

David and I have been pals for umpteen years," Tanya said pointedly.

"Why is my being with Phil any different from your being with David?" Catherine asked heatedly.

"Two simple reasons, Beauty. One, the town's talking. Two, *I* don't have a possessive husband."

Tanya's logic infuriated Catherine. Her head burst with ways to rephrase her position. "Tanya, you're a doll for . . ."

"*I* think you're both dolls, and that calls for a drink," Phil sang out as he jogged across the room to the bar.

"I've always said work is the curse of the drinking classes and that meeting and rehearsal are going to be murder," Tanya said brightly.

"It was Oscar Wilde who said it, and not always, but just once. But I'll take your order . . . a Scotch Sour, right? Same for me," he said, tossing an ice cube and catching it in the highball glass. "And what'll it be for you, Kit?"

"Phil! You know that David does not like Beauty to drink."

Catherine sprang from her chair, almost upsetting Tanya from the arm. "The devil with what David likes! I'll have the same, please," she said defiantly.

"Boy, you're begging for trouble," Tanya warned.

Catherine whirled upon Tanya. "I'm bored with all the stupid advice everyone gives me for my so-called welfare."

Phil shrugged. "Sure, Kit, why not? One drink can't kill you." He handed her the drink he'd made for himself.

She was about to sip when the glass was knocked from her hand.

David lowered his hand. His face was reddening through his tan. His mouth turned down harshly. "Catherine, I *forbid* . . ."

"You're not God!"

"You need a keeper!" David's neck swelled over his collar, throbbing where a vein stood out. His voice was loud, barely under control.

"You act as if I never had a drink in my life!" Catherine shouted. "You forget we met at a cocktail party. If I could drink then, why not . . ."

"What in hell would you look like today, if I hadn't stopped you from drinking?" David's fury broke loose.

"Probably like a human being damned instead of a porcelain doll!"

David spat out the words: "Your beauty is as much mine as yours." His voice was harsh, "I intend to protect it."

'All right, you two. All right." Tanya soothed. "Now you both have it out of your systems. Let's take the boxing gloves off. I never heard you use such ugly tones before."

"You should be here when we're alone," Catherine said bitterly. All at once, she burst out laughing at her own phrasing. Then the tears came.

"Heavens," Tanya cried, making an exaggerated face of horror, "haven't you heard of that new miracle drug, *Divorce?*" Despite her mugging, Tanya left no doubt that she had made a serious suggestion.

Catherine looked shocked. "Divorce?" she repeated huskily.

Phil felt a twinge of embarrassment for Kit. The fight had gone out of her so quickly.

David stared long at Tanya, then at Catherine. His voice was deep and slow: "Catherine is one thing I will *never* give up."

Catherine seethed. "Thing? *Thing*, David?"

"Oh, damn it, you know I didn't mean it that way. Look, let's forget any of this happened. I'm sorry, Catherine. Now be a good girl, go powder your nose and let's get to the meeting . . . on time for once," he ended with a lame attempt at humour.

"I'm not going, David."

"Of course you'll go. Tanya and I'll go ahead. Phil can bring you down."

In answer, Catherine marched off to her room.

David turned to Tanya and Phil. The anger was gone. The ugliness was merely ruggedness and sincerity again. "My, that was a treat for you two. Don't know what came over me. Accept my apologies, won't you?" He didn't wait for an answer, but began to usher Tanya out.

At the door, he stopped, called back to Phil, "Just butter her up a bit, Phil. She'll come along." Then he and Tanya were gone.

Phil raced to Catherine's room. Her weeping carried a low moan.

He took her in his arms. "Go ahead, darling, cry it out."

She hid her face from him. The sobs subsided and she choked out, "I must be an awful sight."

"Hell, I don't care if you get fat, freckled or wrinkled."

"Oh, Phil, I'm so miserable!"

"I'm not, Kit. Because I learned what Tanya, and maybe David have known all along. I love you, Kit. I love you and didn't even know it myself until a few minutes ago."

"Phil, I love you, too . . . oh, so much, darling. I was afraid to admit it to myself." She slid her cheek along his, whispered, "But what can we do?"

"Tanya said it—divorce."

Catherine pulled back and walked over to the mammoth picture window facing the sea. "And leave all this? Phil, I don't know. I couldn't face not having a cent again."

"Look, we can talk about it later . . . when we're both calmer. Right now, we'd better be on our way, before there's talk."

On the way down the hill, they said the small things, the

preciously unimportant and all-important things of new lovers.

Phil pulled the car behind the shed where the canvas display booths were stored. He kissed her warmly. "Let's go, kitten."

"Phil, one thing. David meant it. He'll never give me up."

"He might have to," Phil said thoughtfully.

Catherine sat between David and a local sculptor, Hans Forster. Phil found a seat back of them, next to Tanya.

David was so solicitous of Catherine, Tanya had a difficult time with her eyebrows.

When the meeting broke up, Hans held David back. "I think everything's under control, David. Now, if only the display booths could be meted out as smoothly . . ."

"God gravy, Hans, what's with the walking wounded?" Tanya queried, pointing to a bandage extending from the sculptor's wrist to his elbow.

"Dangers of my trade. Been fiddling with some copper mobiles to spice my sculpture display in the show. I discovered that selenium sulphide gives copper enamel a thoroughly distinctive finish." He added wryly, "It almost finished me, when I spilled some of the selenium on my arm. Look," and Hans tugged back the top of the bandage.

They all shuddered at the sight of the angry rawness where the chemical had eaten flesh.

"I was damned lucky Fritz Mann was around. He knew an antidote that prevented blood poisoning."

"Lucky, indeed," David commented.

"At least you didn't get it on your face," Catherine said.

Hans guffawed. "Face? I'm glad I didn't get it on my hands. *They're* my stock in trade. Now the pity'd be if that stuff ever got on a face like yours."

David cleared his throat and suggested they get over to the rehearsal area.

The clerk ladled the powder into the tin with care. When it was three-quarters filled, he placed the top on cautiously, wrapped the tin in tissue. However, he did not immediately put the package into his customer's upturned palm. "Now, remember what I said," he lectured primly. "Always use gloves when you mix the selenium. It really is quite toxic."

On the day the festival opened, a light breeze from the ocean swayed banners and pennants and cooled visitors strolling about.

The open-faced canvas stalls were set in rows. Tourists and followers of the arts wandered through the aisles, murmuring approval and dissent over jewel-

ry, paintings, ceramics, sculpture, mosaics and myriad offshoots such as scenes, depicted in coloured beans and sculptings hammered out of scorched tin cans.

The first evening's performance of the Living Arts Tableaux was a sell-out.

Shortly after seven that evening, the press party backstage had progressed beyond the point of nervous overtures by the amateur Press Relations Committee.

Onstage, mammoth frames, dramatically arranged, encased backgrounds for the original paintings to be reproduced. Actors would soon step into the frames to hold statue-still poses.

The stage manager raced about frantically. A support was needed for a ballerina in one of the tableaux. A newsman quipped, "Why not get her a stronger partner, bud?"

The flustered stage manager replied testily, "You think it's easy to hold a girl in mid-air for a minute and a half without moving a muscle? All I want is to find that bicycle seat we had during rehearsal."

The lighting director caused a brief panic, when a bank of spots wouldn't glimmer.

The co-ordinator walked tranquilly from one to another, giving concise last-minute instructions, checking off his list. No one guessed he was quite drunk.

When he spotted Catherine, he moved quickly. "My precious Beauty, you'll never make it to curtain time. It's lucky you're in the final tableau. Off to your dressing-room, now. Why, you're trembling . . . of course, your first performance. I'll send Sylvia in with a tranquillizer. She'll help you apply the gilt. Hurry, now!"

Tanya followed Catherine into the dressing-room they shared. Tanya's make-up table had but two jars on it—one filled with gilt; one, with gilt-remover. Catherine's had two identical jars plus a host of smaller jars, giving it the appearance of a miniature cosmetics counter.

Sylvia bustled in and chattered incessantly throughout the preparations.

Even veterans of the Living Arts Tableaux stared after Catherine as she made her way to the wings. A sheath of gold cloth blended into the shimmering gold of her skin.

She strained to hear Phil's narration. His voice went out to the steep, black half-circle of tiered benches, up to the endless dark of sky over the heads of the silent audience.

The lights came up on the tableau. Catherine attributed the initial hush and swiftly followed "ah" as a tribute to her love.

From then on, Catherine was mesmerized, even through her own role in the Venetian Masque

tableau which climaxed the performance. She felt the excitement of the audience, but no more.

After the curtain came down, they held the tableau long enough for the photographers. David said something and ran off. Phil tried to get to her, but reporters flooded onstage and surrounded them with separate eddies of noise and flash-bulbs.

When Catherine finally reached her dressing-room, Tanya was already in street clothes.

"Beauty, come just as you are. Your guests will love seeing a close-up of their hostess."

"Tanya, where's David?"

"Why, I guess he's still with the reporters. He said he'll meet us at the house. Hans is driving Phil over . . . They promised to keep your thirsty guests happy till we arrive."

Catherine made no motion to go.

"Really, Beauty!" Tanya took Catherine's jar of gilt-remover in one hand, Catherine's wrist in the other and led her to the door.

From the moment they entered the living-room, a continuous stream of guests lavished praise on Catherine. There were jokes about David looking handsome . . . behind his mask. Someone said "death mask." Catherine felt numb . . . she had a strange yearning to scream.

"Didn't you hear me, Beauty?" It was David. "You'd better get all that goop off. You know your skin is delicate."

"David!" Her voice was shrill. "Why haven't you cleaned off the gilt?"

"Why, my dear Catherine. Your concern amazes me. I was busy with the Press, but I brought my remover with me, see?"

Catherine stared at the jar, at his gilded head, at his gilt shoulders and back at the jar—which held a harmless-looking cream in it. She had blended the deadly selenium in smoothly. He'd never know, until it was too late.

Phil and Tanya joined them, then others in quick succession.

Catherine seemed oblivious to the effusive gushing about her perfection.

Tanya pulled Catherine away. "She won't be beautiful for long, if she doesn't get that junk off her lily-white. Come on, Beauty, I'll help you." She turned back to David. "Your rhinoceros hide can't take that gilt too long, either."

"You're right, Tanya, I'll clean off in a minute,' David said.

The skin-tight costume was difficult to peel off. Tanya left after Catherine assured her she could manage the rest without help.

She was staring at her reflection in the mirror. The wig left a crescent of white skin between the gilt on Catherine's face and her hair-line. She could hear

David move around in his room. She pictured his tanned hand dipping into the jar, smearing the gilt remover. She could see him writhing, hear his screams. But it was quiet, except for the hubbub of their guests.

She shuddered, then dipped into the jar. The cream was cool. She spread it on her face with both hands.

For an instant, she could not tell. The sudden unexpected contact confused the sensations of hot and cold.

She shrieked, her face contorted from the scorching pain. She clutched at her cheeks. *She* was screaming . . . not David. Her head whirled. Someone came into her room

The last thing she heard was Tanya calling an ambulance.

Into the fuzzy, dizzying glow, pain darted its tongue. The pain subsided. The glow became no more than a ceiling light. And Catherine heard a voice . . . silly, tickling words that said "no serious damage, except to her hands and face, face, face . . ."

Catherine refused to open her eyes. She felt. Gently—with her wrists. Bandage. Everywhere she touched, bandage.

She rolled her head on the pillow, searching the inner membrane of her eyelids for a haven. They were hot with a faint odour of burnt cloth.

In first focus, her eyes found an irregular stain on the ceiling. Cracked paint curled down from pitted plaster. Cracked skin, torn with a fire that ate the whiteness and sotfness of skin.

"Are you awake, Catherine?"

"David," she moaned, hurting her mouth. "How did you find out?"

"He didn't." It was Tanya's voice. "David knew nothing about it. I saw you go into that supply shop."

"You followed me?" Catherine mumbled.

"In a way. By the time I found a parking place, you were gone. But the clerk remembered you. He said you were the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and was concerned that you might be careless with that chemical he'd sold you."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Catherine groaned.

"I thought you had actually taken an interest in something besides your looks. When you failed to say anything about copper enamelling, I thought you planned to surprise David with . . . "

David broke in, "A charming surprise, my dear."

Tanya went on. "On opening night at the festival, you were so nervous and jittery, that I actually was concerned about you." Tanya paused long enough to snort with disgust. "You left the party and I went after you intending to ask what you need-

ed. But you acted so suspiciously, I followed you, instead, and saw you go into David's dressing-room and put a jar of gilt-remover on his make-up table. Well, you can figure out the rest for yourself. I simply switched David's jars and yours. I couldn't really believe you'd do anything vicious, but I remembered Hans Forster's accident and your purchase of that chemical."

Catherine moaned.

Tanya's voice was defiant now. "If I were wrong about my suspicions, why, no one would be hurt. If I were right . . " Tanya finished in mid-phrase.

"You knew you were right, didn't you, Tanya?" Catherine said.

"I knew if I were right, you didn't deserve David . . . although I've always known he'd never want me. He needs a beautiful wife."

Catherine tried to raise herself. She could not muster the strength. She fell back on to the pillow, gathering her energy. "He no longer has a beautiful wife." Her voice was full of self-pity. "You can have him, now. And if Phil still wants me . . ."

"Catherine, my dear," David reproved, "after this . . . this terrible accident, how could I ever leave you?"

Catherine heard footsteps, knew that Tanya had left the room.

She opened her eyes, sought out the cancerous spot on the ceiling. A ragged lump of the peeling paint quivered ever so slightly.

David's voice was cold and dry. "No, Catherine. There will be no investigation, no scandal, no divorce."

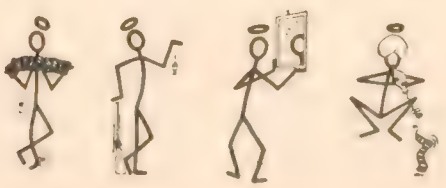
"But my face? You never kept anything that wasn't perfect."

"You're right my dear. I always destroy any object whose perfection is marred.

She clamped her eyelids shut.

His voice was now a whisper.

"However, you'll have two questions to keep you company. *When?* And *how?*"



the ripper of storyville

by Edward D. Hoch

BEN SNOW met Archer Kinsman in a little Texas town near the Gulf Coast. It had been a year of wandering for Ben, and with the coming of winter he'd headed south ahead of the snow and cold. Here, near the Mexican border, there was still a scent of the old west in the air, still a blending of horseflesh and longhorns and gunsmoke. It was Ben's sort of town—at least till Archer Kinsman found him there.

Kinsman was old, not so much in years as in appearance. He was a man with one foot in the grave, and the fancy carriage, the pearl-handled pistols, the expensive cigars would not keep him out of it. He found Ben in the back room of the Rio Cafe, and settled down across the table from him with an air of troubled haste. "You're Ben Snow, aren't you?"

"That's right," Ben said, taking in the trappings of wealth, the ashen complexion that aged the hard lines of the face.

"I'd like to hire you for a job," man. You may have heard the

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There are times when we forget that we are a very young people and that, in the lifetime of men still alive today, a man could walk up to a stranger and say, "I want to hire the fastest gun in New Mexico." Edward D Hoch, in this latest Ben Snow story, once more brings to life the America, at the turn of the century, which this man, haunted by a legend, would have known.

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name."

"Sorry. I'm a stranger in these parts." Whatever he wanted, it would probably be good for a free drink at the very least.

"But your fame has preceeded you, Mr. Snow." And there was the knowing smile again, that look which had followed him across the west.

"You want to hire a gun?"

"I want to hire the fastest gun in New Mexico."

"Wrong state, Mr. Kinsman. This is Texas."

"But you're from New Mexico, aren't you?"

Ben sighed and drained the bottom of his beer glass. "Yes. I'm from New Mexico."

"Let me buy you a beer." He signalled to the bartender out front. "I've heard stories, you know. About your little adventure in Mexico, and the others. You're quite a man."

"Let's be frank, Mr. Kinsman. You've heard stories that I'm Billy the Kid, not dead after nearly twenty years but very much alive, wandering the west with a fast gun for hire. The stories aren't true."

Kinsman brushed it aside. "Of course not—didn't believe them for an instant! But you're still the man I want to hire. There is absolutely no killing involved. In fact quite the opposite. I want you to bring my daughter back from New Orleans."

"Then why do you need a fast gun?"

"I need a man who can protect himself against some tough customers. My daughter . . . well, perhaps I should tell you the whole story." He passed a handkerchief across his face, and his skin was as white as the cloth. "There were the three of us—my wife, my daughter Bess, and myself. We lived up north a ways. After years of nothing I'd managed to get together enough money to buy a small ranch, and things were looking pretty good. But I suppose I wasn't a very good father. I certainly wasn't a very good husband. One night I found my wife in bed with my foreman. I shot him, of course, but she jumped in front of my gun and they both died. Bess was eighteen when it happened, and I guess it was an awful shock to her. I never knew whether she blamed me or her mother more, but I suppose we were both destroyed that night in her eyes. Anyway, she left the ranch—walked out on me—and I haven't laid eyes on her in six years."

Though his eyes had blurred a bit in the telling, it was still more than obvious that Archer Kinsman was carved out of stone. His wife and daughter had gone, and for all his words the fact didn't really upset him. The only thing that interested Ben was why, after those six years, he was suddenly taking some action. "You say she's in

New Orleans?"

Kinsman nodded. "At first she wrote to me occasionally. Not so much to reassure me as to add to my torment, I think. She'd drifted along the coast to New Orleans and became . . . well, a common prostitute. I think that's the worst thing a father can say about his daughter, but damn it there's no other halfway polite name for it. She wrote me that she was following in her mother's footsteps, and it was a letter near tore my heart out. I went looking for her a few years ago, got as far as that section—Storyville, they call it now—and I turned right around and came back home. I guess I was afraid of what I might find. God—the white girls and the black ones are together, in the same houses!"

"And you want me to go there, to find her?"

He nodded again. "I'll pay you well to bring her back to me, Snow. I know you're a man can do it."

"Why is it so important, after six years?"

His hand shook as he reached for his drink. "Look at me, just look at me! There's death in these eyes, on this face. I've been to the best doctors in the state and they all tell me the same thing. A blood disease of some sort. No cure, no hope. I'll be a dead man in a month, two months, three months at most. It's an awful thing to know you're going to die."

"Everyone has to die, Mr. Kinsman."

"But do you really believe that? Don't you think, deep down inside, that you might be the exception?"

"I might have when I was younger," Ben admitted. "I think every youth has dreams of immortality." And then suddenly, hardly knowing he'd spoken the words, or why, he added, "I'll get your daughter for you, Mr. Kinsman. I'll bring her back."

"God, I want to see her worse than anything else in the world. To see her before I die. I've written her, sent her a hundred dollars every Christmas, and on her birthday . . . I'm a rich man now, Mr. Snow. It was almost as if complete success followed on the tragedy of my life. A year after she left me, a year after I killed my wife, oil was discovered on my land. Imagine—damned black stuff that kills off the grazing land! And yet it's made me a millionaire. I'd kept it a secret for a long time, not daring to tell Bess when I wrote her, fearing that she'd come back just for the money. But last month I told her, because with death staring me in the face that was her money, all of it."

"Did she answer your letter?"

"No. As I said, at first she wrote fairly regularly. Lately, during the past two years, I've

hardly had a word from her. A simple *Thanks* scrawled on a post card in response to my Christmas gift. And a cheap greeting card for my birthday. At least she still remembers that. But nothing, not a word, when I told her she might soon have a million dollars."

"Do you have her address?"

"No. I write to General Delivery and she picks them up there. I have a picture, a photograph, taken when she was fifteen, if that's any help."

Ben studied the photograph, and saw a girl with long blonde hair. A pretty girl who might now be beautiful. In the picture she still clung to the wisp of innocence about the eyes, but that would be gone now. The face would be changed. And the body.

And the mind.

"All right," Ben sighed. "But you still haven't explained it all. Why me? Why not just a lawyer to bring her back?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's the murders that have added to my anxiety."

"Murders?" The word sent a familiar chill down Ben's spine.

"I imagined you'd read about it in the papers."

"I rarely read papers."

"Three weeks ago one of these women was killed in Storyville. Slashed to death with a knife. Last week there was another identical killing. Some of the papers have hinted there'll be more. They think it's him."

"Him? Who?"

"That English fellow. What was his name? Jack the Ripper . . ."

Storyville had come into being in the heart of New Orleeans only a few years earlier, in '97, as a result of a city ordinance sponsored by Alderman Story. Although prostitution had been legal in the city since before the Civil War, this was the first attempt to limit it to a specific section of the city. It was a large hunk of the area, too — bounded by Iberville Street, St. Louis, North Basin, and North Robertson Street. In it were to be found the houses, saloons and casinos which made up the dark side of New Orleans life. Street after street, here was the Arlington Palace, the New Mahogany Hall, the Poodle Dog Cafe, Pete Lala's Cafe, and more. White and Negro, working together, playing together. The houses themselves ranged from marbled, elevator-equipped palaces like the New Mahogany to tiny one-room "cribs" just off the street. It was a city in itself, and over it all hung the muted beat of a new music, muffled only by the closed doors and shuttered windows now that winter had shuffled south.

Ben Snow heard the music on his first afternoon in Storyville,

as he wandered down Basin Street on the flimsy trail of the girl named Bess Kinsman. He wore his gun under his coat—not the tiny Derringer he sometimes carried but the old .45 he hardly knew the heft of any more. New Orleans was eastern, but it was still .45 country. At least this week. It was four days since he'd left Kinsman in Texas, long enough for another girl to have died horribly in the shady back alleys of Storyville. The morning paper had told him all there was to know: her name was "Sadie Stride, Negro," about thirty years of age. She'd been found face down in a shallow fountain in front of one of the more elaborate houses. There was no doubt that the same knifer had killed all three girls.

Ripper Prowls Storyville! one paper screamed. And maybe he was. Ben didn't really care at that point, so long as he kept his knife off one girl named Bess Kinsman. But the heavy gun felt good at his side.

"Bess Kinsman."

"Bess Kinsman? Don't know her. Nearly six hundred girls in the district this winter. Look, go over to the Arlington Annex and buy a *Blue Book* for a quarter. If she's a Storyville girl she's listed in there."

"Thanks. What's that music they're playing, anyway?"

"That there's called jazz sometimes. It's real music."

At the saloon called the Arlington Annex there was a single black piano player, and he too was running through the rhythm and beat of it. The customers, a mixture of races, seemed to have caught the feeling of the music. A dark girl at the bar was moving her body a bit in time to it, and one couple was doing a fast dance in the back. Ben followed instructions and purchased a *Blue Book* for twenty-five cents, then sat down at a table to study it with growing amazement.

Here, in carefully alphabetized lists, were the women of Storyville—white, octoroon (though only a half-dozen of these), and "Negro". There were ads for the bars too, and for some of the available musicians. They were piano players for the most part, colored almost exclusively, and several prided themselves on their ability to play jazz. But just then Ben was more interested in the listing of girls. *Kinsman, Bess*—there it was, as big and bold as life. Alright, Bess, we've found you.

He walked the three dusky blocks to the address that had followed her name, not really knowing whether he'd find a mansion or a crib. The place, when he reached it, was somewhat between the two extremes, a pale grey house that needed painting. It was not the typical New Orleans place, with scroll-

ing ironwork on the second-floor balcony. No, this one looked more to Ben's inexperienced eye as if it might originally have been built by a northerner—perhaps one of the post-war wave that swept over the disaster of the southland.

"I'm looking for Bess Kinsman," he told the colored girl who answered the door.

"Sorry. We don't open till seven."

"I'm here on business. But not your kind, exactly. I want to talk to her."

"She ain't here. I'll call Countess Lulu for you."

Ben shrugged and stood waiting on the doorstep, trying to conjure up a mental portrait of the woman named Countess Lulu. He would have been way off—she was white, somewhere past forty, with a look of quiet dignity which must have accounted for the name. At one time she might have been heavier than she was now, for the flesh of her face seemed strangely folded in spots, aging her certainly beyond her years.

"Yes? You are looking for one of my girls?"

Ben nodded, removing his hat because it seemed the thing to do. "That's right, Bess Kinsman."

"You police? About the Ripper?"

"No, nothing like that. I just want to speak with Bess I'll pay for her time, if that's what's bothering you"

Countess Lulu seemed uncertain "She's out right now. But if you want to wait . . ."

"I'd like to. Thanks." He followed her into a parlor hung with drab velvet drapes that seemed designed to shut out every vestige of light or sound. There was only one person in the parlor, a huge pale-skinned man chewing on an ugly damp cigar.

"This here's Piggy, our piano player. Every house has to have jazz these days to be any good."

Piggy munched on the cigar and mumbled a half-hearted greeting. He was slumped over a battered upright piano, almost embracing it with a sleepy sort of desire. It might just then have been a woman in his arms.

Countess Lulu seated herself on a heavily pillowed sofa, letting her body sink within the folds of silken splendor as she spoke. "Come sit by me, sir. Bess will be back shortly."

"Has she been with you long?"

"Ever since I came to Storyville. Nearly two years now. Fine girl, and very popular with the customers."

"Does she ever talk about her father? About her life back in Texas?"

"Sometimes. Not often. The girls don't live much in the past."

Ben was carefully rolling a cigarette. "Are you from New

Orleans?"

Countess Lulu shook her head. "Tampa, Havana, Mexico City. I move around. Right now this is the place to be."

"Is New Orleans that sinful a city?"

She gave a vague shrug. "Prostitution's been legal here for almost fifty years. And during the Civil War a northern commander actually issued an order that any southern lady insulting a Yankee soldier in New Orleans could be treated as a common prostitute. Things like that have done little to uplift the city's standing. Men come to New Orleans expecting a wide-open city, and we give it to them. Wait until the Mardi Gras tomorrow night and you'll really see something!"

Ben had heard about the pre-Lenten festival, when all of the city swarmed into Storyville to forget the staid life of the other fifty-one weeks. Often with masks hiding their faces, the wealthy ran wild among the poor in a near-orgy of drunken revelry. He hadn't realized the time was almost upon them, but it was mid-February and Lent would begin on Wednesday.

"Perhaps I'll stay over for it," Ben told her. Behind him, Piggy gave a chuckle at the piano and started running through a tune Ben didn't know.

"We'd put you up here if we had an extra room," Lulu offered. "Sometimes between girls we're near empty. Girls move around a lot. Here today, gone tomorrow. I came to town just after one of the houses burned down, and I was lucky to latch onto some loose ones. Well . . . I think this is Bess now." She'd risen as the front door opened and closed. Two girls and a man entered, and he knew at once which of the ladies was the one he sought.

Her hair was the blonde of the photograph, and if the face was different it was only the difference that aging and hardness could bring. She would be about twenty-four now, nine years older than the picture he carried in his pocket.

"Hello, Bess."

She eyed him with a hard, suspicious look. "Do I know you?"

"I'm a friend of your father. He sent me to find you."

She glanced uncertainly at the two who had entered with her—a handsome dark-haired girl with a look of the south about her, and an alert young man with a chipped front tooth and a thin black mustache. The girl was already going on up the stairs. "I gotta change my clothes, Bess. I'll be in my room if you want me."

"O.K., Dotty. Now, mister, we can talk in here." She mentioned back toward the parlor.

"I was thinking of someplace

more private."

"For five silver dollars you can come up to my room. The price includes a shot of whiskey."

Ben hesitated only a moment. "Fair enough. Does your friend here come along?"

The man with the mustache grunted and Bess said, "I'll see you later, Hugo. Business before pleasure, you know."

She led the way up stairs carefully quilted with thick carpetnig, down a narrow hallway lit by the uneven flickering of gas lamps. And Ben followed with a growing feeling of uncertainty. A simple job was becoming more complex all the time. As he entered the room she indicated, he knew the door across the hall had opened a bit, knew the girl named Dotty was watching through the crack.

"Nice room you have," he told her when she'd closed the door.

"It'll do. Now what do you want?"

He walked over and carefully sat down on the bed. "I thought I told you. Your father sent me."

"What does he want after all these years?"

"I think you know. He wants you home, back in Texas. He's dying."

"I got his letter," she admitted.

"Will you come back with me?"

The expression on her face was difficult to read. It might have been hesitation, it might have been fear. But she answered, "I can't. It's been too long."

"He still loves you."

"Did he tell you why I left? Did he tell you what happened?"

Ben nodded. "He told me."

"And you think I can go back? To the man who murdered my mother?"

"The man is your father. He's dying."

She lit a cigarette. It was the first time Ben had ever seen a woman smoke. "I can't go back. That's all there is to it."

"He's a wealthy man, Bess. A millionaire. And it's all going to be yours. Couldn't you even go back for a million dollars?"

"You don't understand," she said. "You don't know what I've been through, what I've become." He knew, but he didn't say it. Somehow the words didn't fit her face.

"These killings have your father worried. You must be able to understand that much, at least."

"I live here for six years, lead this kind of a life, and he worries now that I might get killed!"

Ben sighed and got to his feet. He could see that further conversation would be useless. "All right. Perhaps I'll see you again. I plan to be around for a few days." Then, as an afterthought, "Who were the people you came in with?"

"I don't see that it's any of your business, Mr. . . .?"

"Snow."

". . . Snow, but I'll tell you anyway. Dotty has the room across the hall. I've known her for five years, almost since I first came here. Hugo is a good friend. I might even marry him someday, though I'm sure my father would never approve. Satisfied?"

"Satisfied," he said with a smile. "See you around. And think about it, huh? He really cares about you."

"Goodbye, Mr. Snow."

"Aren't you forgetting the five dollars?"

"I was being nasty. Forgive me." For the first time there seemed something beneath the hard outer shell. He smiled as he went out the door.

Downstairs, Piggy was playing the piano and a couple of colored youths had drifted in off the street to listen. Countess Lulu was nowhere to be seen. Ben went outside into the twilight and started aimlessly down the avenue. Already, around him, the sounds of night were swelling up, strange sounds. Happy, vibrant sounds, but still strange.

Ben saw the man before he was near enough to speak. He came out of the gaslit gloom with a steady, certain pace, and his hands were deep in the pockets of a greatcoat oddly warm for the climate, even in February. The man smiled slightly and stopped dead in Ben's path. "Don't go for that gun," he said quietly. "I mean no harm."

"Who are you?"

"Police. Detective Inspector Jonathan Withers, at your service, Sir."

"Oh?"

"You're a stranger in the area. A stranger in the midst of a rash of murders needs questioning. Agreed?"

"Agreed." The man was obviously English, but with a touch of the South in his speech. He would have been there a number of years.

Inspector Withers smiled. "We're getting along fine. Now I've already had some reports on you. Name, Ben Snow. Correct?"

"Correct. I was hired by a Texas oilman to find his daughter and bring her back home, which I am attempting to do." He went on to sketch in some brief details of his visit and the day's movements around Storyville.

Withers nodded and seemed satisfied. "Come in here. I'll buy you a beer. We have more to talk about." And a few minutes later, over their drinks, he leaned forward and asked, "Have you ever heard of Jack the Ripper?"

"A little. A mass murderer over in London a few years back."

Withers nodded. "In 1888, to be exact. He killed seven women, all prostitutes, and he's never

been apprehended. There was a story he'd come to the United States, killed a couple of women up in New Jersey."

"You're English," Ben said, giving words to the obvious.

Inspector Withers smiled thinly. "I was a London bobby in 1888. I suppose in one way or another I've been on the trail of the Ripper ever since."

"You think this is the same man?"

"The crimes are amazingly similar. Prostitutes, struck down in the streets and alleys of the red light district, horribly hacked with a knife. And of course if I'm right there'll be more killings. He'll get his courage up and go inside again, as he did in London. Right into their rooms."

"Who were these three women?"

The detective counted them off on his fingers. "First, a few weeks back, was a reformed prostitute named Jane Swann. She sang at one of the bars. Killed in an alley. Then, just the other night, Sadie Stride, dead in a fountain a few blocks from here. The Ripper's fifth victim, by the way, was named Elizabeth Stride. Maybe just a coincidence, maybe not."

"Could it be something else? Could there be a racial angle?"

Inspector Withers shook his head. "The first two were white, the latest one colored. We've found no connection among them except for the fact they were all prostitutes at one time. Of course, it's difficult to go back very far—so many people coming and going all the time."

The beat of a jazz piano rose and fell at intervals, like the piquant pounding of some distant surf. "You don't really think I'm involved?" Ben asked.

"Probably not. At least I know you're not Jack the Ripper. There are some reports, though . . ."

"That I might be Billy the Kid? One's as ridiculous as the other."

"You carry a gun under your coat."

"Don't you think it's a good idea, with a mad killer at large?"

Inspector Withers shrugged. "I naturally take the attitude that the police are able to provide sufficient protection."

"Did they provide it for the Stride girl the other night?"

The detective stood up, signifying the conversation was ended without an answer to Ben's final question. "I'll be in touch with you," he said. "If you learn anything, I can always be found."

Ben watched him leave and then ordered another beer. He sat for a time listening to the piano, watching the city of night awaken, stretch, and go off to live. Finally, as he knew he would, he found himself wandering back to the house three

blocks from Basin. It was alight now, with all the sad joys of darkness, loud with the music and the laughter that signalled a kind of escape to the world of Storyville. It had been escape, at least, for Bess Kinsman.

Countess Lulu was at the door. "Decided to come back as a customer?"

"Not exactly. I wanted to see Bess again."

"Cost you cash this time. To me."

He handed her the money and started upstairs. The place was quiet for the moment, then he noticed that Piggy was away from his beloved piano. A black man passed him on the stairs, looking away, hurrying to be out of the place. Ben knocked on her door and entered when she gave the word. If she was surprised to see him again she made no sign of it, but only sat waiting on the bed in an air of innocence that must have started with Eve.

"Hello again, Bess."

"You're back soon."

"I was wondering if you'd thought about it. Going back to Texas."

"I've thought about it."

The hardness was there, in her eyes, on her lips. This would not be the same girl Archer Kinsman had driven away, six years earlier. "And?"

"I told you my answer earlier. I haven't changed my mind."

Hardness, even with that innocence which still clung like a evil. She had to be an amazing actress, but which mood was the act? "I was hoping . . ."

He never finished the sentence. A scream had started, raising like the wail of the damned, to be cut off as suddenly as it began. Bess Kinsman was on her feet in an instant. "It's Dotty, across the hall!"

They were into the hall, pounding on the door, forcing the lock, because somehow the sudden silence was more terrifying than the scream. Countess Lulu had appeared from somewhere, and Piggy, and the other girls, and on their faces was written the single fearful thought. And the door shivered and splintered under Ben's shoulder and they were looking in on it.

At first it didn't seem so bad. At first she looked almost alive, sitting on the floor with her back to the wall looking at the great red gash where her stomach had been. Then, as they watched, her head started to fall to one side and they saw the thin red razor line on her throat.

It was then that Bess screamed . . .

Inspector Withers was unhappy. He paced the downstairs parlor like a caged tiger, waiting while his men completed the task in the upper room. "A fourth

one," he said, "and the day before Mardi Gras. Can you imagine what that madman will do tomorrow, when he's free to wander masked and unnoticed?"

Ben had settled onto Piggy's piano bench, listening, watching, his hand never far from his gun. He had met many murderers before, but this one, so near and yet so unseen, had unnerved even him. "How did he get in?"

Withers shrugged. "Through the window, across the roof. It would seem that the choice of Dotty Ringsome as the victim was dictated simply by the location of her room and the fact that she was alone at the time."

But Ben was thinking. "Her scream was cut off so quickly, though. She didn't start screaming when she saw him coming through the window. He must have actually had the knife in her stomach before she yelled. Then he silenced her with a slash at her throat. Wouldn't this indicate it was someone she knew? Someone she trusted?"

"She might have been dozing on the bed with her eyes closed."

"I suppose so," Ben conceeded.

He waited for a time longer, answering questions about what little he knew, watching while everyone in the house underwent the inquisition by Withers and his men. Finally, some time after midnight, they allowed him to leave. He walked the few blocks to the Arlington Palace and found there a room for the night.

Sleep came quickly, but he kept his gun under the pillow, close at hand. His last thought was that somehow he had to get Kinsman's daughter out of that place. The evil that had struck down four girls was very close to her . . .

In the morning he found the Storyville blocks strangely transformed, wearing in the midst of their hidden terror the colorful streamers and gay trappings of carnival time. It was Mardi Gras, the day before Lent, and already there was a scattering of masked, costumed figures in the streets. Down the block a newsboy shouted the latest on the Ripper murders, but even this went unnoticed or unadmitted on a day set aside for gaity.

The Arlington Annex adjoined the hotel lobby and in the mornings provided a reasonable place to eat breakfast. A bartender was polishing glasses and one of the girls brought Ben a plate of bacon and eggs with an early-morning air of bustle. At this hour the only other customer was a vaguely familiar young man with a mustache and a chipped tooth. It took Ben only a moment to place him—Bess's friend, Hugo.

"Hello, there," he offered through a mouthful of food.

"Snow, isn't it?"

"That's right, Ben Snow."

"I'm Hugo Dadier. I hear Bess's old man hired you."

"I guess that's right. He wants her back in Texas."

Dadier had remained standing at the bar. Now he walked over to Ben's table. "I've known Bess from almost her first day in New Orleans. I like to think I can take care of her."

"Can you protect her against the Ripper? Can you get her away from this kind of life she's leading? Can you give her a million dollars?"

"I can try," Dadier said, the eternal answer of the eternal young man, even here among the sins of Storyville.

"Do you think you're right for her? What are you—a pimp, a drug peddler, maybe?"

"Bess and I are two of a kind. We understand each other."

"I'll bet. You should take an ad for her in the *Blue Book*. It might help her business." The remark angered Dadier, but before he could reply Ben had a thought. "Say, do they keep back issues of the *Blue Book* here?"

"I don't know," Dadier said with a shrug, controlling his anger. "Ask the bartender, not me."

Ben walked over to the long polished bar and interrupted the glass-wiping task. "Back issues of the *Blue Book*—do you have any?"

The bartender eyed him oddly. "What good are back issues? The current one's got all the girl's listed. The girls not listed aren't around any more."

"I just wanted to see some."

"Didn't start publishing it till '95."

"All right. Do you have them from '95 on?"

"Guess I could find you a set, back in the office. Just a minute." Ben waited and presently the bartender returned, bearing five dog-eared copies of past *Blue Books*. "You can look at 'em here, but I gotta have them back."

"Fine."

Hugo Dadier had resumed his position at the bar as Ben sat down and began paging through the first of the booklets, not knowing exactly what he was seeking, yet feeling somehow that he would find it here. The books had grown in size with each passing year, and in '97 they had proudly proclaimed the official birth of the Storyville district. Gradually the ads for piano players had begun to appear, though the word "jazz" was not yet used in them.

But right now Ben was more interested in the names. He scanned the lists, making an occasional notes, and found what he wanted in a sudden flash of brilliance. The book was two years old, but it seemed to be there. Perhaps, just perhaps, the key to the Ripper murders.

"You seen Inspector Withers

around this morning?" he called out to the bartender.

"Not yet. He usually comes by about noon, but today's Mardi Gras."

"I know."

Ben stuffed one of the *Blue Books* into his pocket and made for the door. "Say, I told you I had to have those back!" the bartender called after him, but he was already into the street, growing crowd of masked, paint-swallowed up by a constantly ed revelers.

It took Ben two hours to track down Withers, and when he found him the Englishman was helping to break up a crowd that had gathered outside of one of the houses on North Robertson. A girl, obviously drunk or drugged, had climbed out on the roof in a brief beaded costume and was attempting to do a French cancan, much to the delight of the crowd below.

"Well," he said, finally noticing Ben in the midst of them, "enjoying the show?"

"I've been looking for you. Can we talk?"

Inspector Withers studied his set face for a moment, then motioned down the street. "At the station house. Come on."

Over a cigarette-stained table in an almost bare office, Ben produced the two-year-old *Blue Book*. He saw the spark of interest in the detective's eyes at once, and he said, "I think I'm on to something, but I need a bit of your knowledge of the district."

"Go on."

"This book lists the girls, with their current addresses, as you know. Well, two years ago all of the dead girls were living at the same address."

"The hell! Let me see that!"

"They were all at Pearl's Pleasure Palace. Now you tell me the rest of it, Inspector."

Withers frowned, then leaned back in his chair. "Of course! I know one or two of them had worked at Pearl's, but after two years I'd forgotten about the others. Pearl's is the place that burned down."

"How many girls were there?"

"At the time of the fire? She had six, I think."

"No piano player?"

Withers shook his head. "Not then. That's a recent addition to these places."

"All right." Ben picked up the book again. "Here are the names I found: Sadie Stride . . ."

"The Ripper's third victim."

"Jane Swann . . ."

"The first victim. She got out of the business right after the fire."

"Laura O'Toole . . ."

"Forget her. She was killed in the fire."

"Mary Quinn . . ."

"The second victim."

"Dotty Ringsome . . ."

"Victim number four, just last

night. As you know."

"And Pearl herself?"

Withers frowned at the memory. "Pearl was a middle-aged bum, a heavy drinker. Some even said her drinking caused the fire that night. Last year she killed a man with a broken bottle and fled to South America. She's still there, living in Brazil."

Ben sighed at the list before him. He turned the page and stared down at the final name he'd checked. "The sixth girl in Pearl's house . . ."

"And the Ripper's next victim, if you're correct."

". . . was Bess Kinsman."

The Inspector's face hardened. "Come on," he said . . .

But it wasn't to be that easy. The streets now in late afternoon were crowded with the noise and color of carnival, filled to overflowing with masked men and painted women who had forgotten or never cared about the Ripper who had already killed four girls. They were out for pleasure, a physical representation of the "pursuit of happiness" the Constitution guaranteed. The Constitution—no, Ben remembered, it was the Declaration of Independence—had put it nicely, but they hadn't said anything in there about murderers. There was no law saying people had to suddenly turn off the happiness just because there was a killer in their midst.

He watched the costumes passing in front of Countess Lulu's house, noting especially one fellow dressed as a policeman, It looked like Piggy, but he couldn't be sure. He couldn't be sure of anything just then.

Withers came out of the house, his eyes sweeping the passing crowds. "Well, she's all right. So far, at least I'll send an officer down to keep an eye out"

"Make sure he doesn't wear a mask. There's a phoney cop out in the crowd."

Withers spotted him and started edging through the crowd. In a moment he was gone, swallowed up in the colorful flow. But Ben stood his ground in front of Countess Lulu's. He knew Archer Kinsman wouldn't be paying much for a dead daughter. A jazz band of sorts went by, the first he'd seen, led by a trumpet-blowing black man dressed like the devil. And as the evening's early-shadows began to lengthen in the street he went inside to see how things were.

"What a night!" Lulu was chirping. "Every girl's busy and there are three birds waiting!"

"Where's your music?"

"Piggy's drunk, parading out there someplace." She left him and vanished through a hall doorway.

He stayed a few moments, watching the costumed men who waited in the parlor. Then the

thought of it all began to sicken him and he turned away, heading back to the street. His hand was on the doorknob when he heard something crash to the floor above his head. Somebody screamed—it might have been Bess Kinsman.

Ben took the stairs three at a time, his hand already brushing aside the coat to get his gun free. Her door was locked but as he rattled the knob she screamed out again. *"Ben, help! It's the Ripper!"*

His shoulder hit the flimsy door, remembering Dotty Ringsome's door the night before, remembering what he'd found there. But Bess Kinsman was very much alive, struggling with a masked figure dressed in a checkered harlequin costume. His right hand clutched a curving knife that flickered with reflected light as they struggled by the bed. *"Shoot him, Ben! He's killing me!"*

But her body was between Ben's gun and the masked killer. As he moved in on the struggling figures the knife plunged downward, slashing at Bess's stomach, darkening her pink housecoat with a sudden splatter of blood. She screamed once more and toppled to the floor, and as Ben caught her falling figure the Ripper hurled himself at the bedroom's sole window, smashing through it in a headlong dive to the roof below.

Ben tore away the housecoat and tried to stop the flow of blood with his handkerchief. Then, as others crowded into the room behind him, he went out the window after the costumed figure.

The roof slanted upward from the window, then ended suddenly with a five-foot gap before the adjoining house. Ben took the leap without thinking twice, landing clawing at the slippery slate. Above him, against the blue night sky, the harlequin costume paused in flight to hurl a shingle of slate down at his gripping fingers. He felt the bits of rock nick his cheek, then he was up, stripping the impeding coat from his shoulders, checking the feel of the gun still in his holster as he climbed. Ahead, the enemy had swung down, hand over hand, to cling flylike to the ornate iron rail[illegible] housefront.

Ben followed, feeling [illegible] metal underhand, seeing n[illegible] very eyes of the enemy inc[illegible] away, close enough almost to reach. And the knife blade dull now with darkness, moving like a cobra as the killer hung with one hand clinging. The blade shot out, slashing, as Ben lost his footing and hung by his fingers above the street twenty feet below. And now the slasher moved in for the kill and the sweep of the knife came closer. Dangling, Ben risked one hand, dropping

it to the holster at his side, pulling the gun free, firing as he hung swinging in the air against the iron grillworked balcony.

It was not the best shot of his life, but it sufficed. The masked figure shuddered as the bullet tore into his side and relaxed his grip on the metal. He fell slowly, like a deflated balloon, and landed on the paving below with a sick thud of finality.

Ben climbed down and fought his way through the gathering crowd. He bent to the bloody, broken figure and ripped away the mask. It was the face of Bess's friend, Hugo Dadier . . .

The following day was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, and even in Storyville there were those who went to church this day. But for Inspector Withers and Ben Snow there ɐr things to be done. At ɔital they found Bess resting comfortably in row white bed. She was ılling, even though she'd been told a few hours earlier the identity of her attacker.

"It's hard to believe, I know," she told them, "but at times there was a bit of strangeness about him. To think that he killed those four girls so horribly . . ."

"There is no doubt he did it," Withers said. "The knife was the type used in all the killings. Of course he's too young to have been Jack the Ripper, but he must have been just as insane."

"Perhaps not," Ben said quietly. "Or at least not quite as insane as he might seem."

Bess turned to him with difficulty. "You know why he did it? Why he killed the others and tried to kill me?"

"I think so." He turned away from her. "I imagine it will all come out at the trial."

"The trial!" she said, startled. "But he's dead!"

"Not his trial—yours. Inspector Withers is here to arrest you as an accessory in those four murders."

"But . . . but that's crazy! He tried to kill me too! Why would I want those girls dead?" She was sitting up in the bed, her face as white as the sheets.

Ben sighed, feeling tired and a bit lonely. "You wanted them dead because your name is Laura O'Toole. You wanted them dead because the real Bess Kinsman was killed in a fire two years ago . . ."

"You were clever," he went on, "very clever. In fact, you made no real mistakes. But I was curious as to why you, of all people, hadn't mentioned the connection among the four murder victims. The police and most everyone else might have forgotten they were all at Pearl's Pleasure Palace at the time of the fire, but certainly you would have remembered. And then of course

there was the attempt on your life last night. When I found that the Ripper was your friend Hugo Dadier I was baffled for a moment. He of all people would never have attacked you last night, because he was actually at the Arlington while I was looking over back copies of the *Blue Book*. He knew I had found the connecting link between the victims, and he knew I would be expecting an attack on you. Also, of course, he was in a position where he could have killed you at any time—so why risk everything with his half-hearted attempt of last evening, at the very time I was expecting it and guarding the house? The answer of course was that the attack was a fake. He never meant to kill you, but he had to attempt it last night solely because he did know I was expecting it. Otherwise I might begin to suspect you."

"You call this a fake?" she shouted from the bed. "My stomach ripped open with a knife?"

"I think in that last instant you had an idea all your own. I think you decided Hugo had served his purpose in killing the girls. So you shouted for me to shoot him, which wasn't in the plan. He saw your double-cross and jabbed a little deeper than he'd planned. Of course I was on my guard as soon as you called my name through the closed door—it meant you'd been watching me enter the house"

"And why in hell did I do all this?" She was not the same girl any more. The hard, cold calculation had taken over completely now.

"Well, those four girls were at Pearl's when it burned down, so I asked myself what they might know that made their deaths so important. And I remembered something. I remembered that Bess Kinsman's long letters to her father stopped about two years ago. That's when it came to me. Bess was the one who died in the fire, and you were the other girl—Laura O'Toole. You must have looked enough alike to fool occasional customers and casual acquaintances, but the other girls in the house would have known you took Bess's place after the fire."

"Why? Do you know that too, smart guy?"

"Why? Well, I imagine in the beginning it was only for that hundred dollars her father sent her every Christmas and birthday. Of course you would have known about it, and with Bess Kinsman dead in the fire you must have seen how easy it would be to change places with her. It meant two hundred dollars a year, and you were reasonably certain her father would never try to visit her here. The four girls knew about the switch, of course, and Pearl, and your friend Hugo. But people come

and go so fast in Storyville, it was easy to fool the rest. Countess Lulu, for example, didn't show up till just after the fire—so to her you were always Bess Kinsman and no one else."

"So why did I decide to kill the girls after two years?"

"They hadn't minded a little two-hundred-a-year racket, but when you got that letter last month saying Bess's father was dying, telling you for the first time he was worth a million dollars in oil lands, you knew you had to remove the witnesses to your impersonation. Those girls would want their cut—a big cut—to keep quiet. Pearl was already far away in South America, and would never return with a murder rap waiting for her, so you had only the four to remove. Hugo did it for you, not knowing you'd take the first opportunity to dispose of him too. And of course the Jack-the-Ripper idea made a natural cover-up for the true motive."

"That's a good story," she said, calmer now. "You think you can prove it?"

"The murders started a week after you got Kinsman's letter about the million-dollar inheritance. It's not evidence, but it's a fact of the kind juries like to hear."

Inspector Withers interrupted her. "We can easily prove you're not Bess Kinsman—by handwriting, among other things. And now that we know what we're loking for, I'm sure we'll turn up other witnesses who knew both you girls. If necessary we can bring Archer Kinsman here to meet you."

"If he lives that long," she challenged.

Ben sighed and ran his hand along the white railing of the bed. "That was my first clue of something wrong—the fact that you wouldn't go back to Texas to your dying father. The fact that Bess had kept writing to him at first implied she still cared a little for him, yet you refused to go back, even with a million dollars waiting for you. You couldn't, of course, because though you looked a little like a picture of Bess at fifteen, you'd never fool her father. You had to gamble on getting the money anyway, knowing old Kinsman had no other relatives. I imagine you would have produced Lulu and scores of other recent friends to convince the lawyers you really were Bess, once Kinsman was dead."

"I'm not saying a word," she mumbled. "We'll see what a jury says."

"Yes, we will," Withers agreed. "We might not convict you of the murders, but the fraud charges and your general character will put you away for a good many years."

When Ben left the room she had started to cry. The hardness

was dissolving, and he wouldn't have been surprised if Withers obtained a full confession before too many days.

But for Ben now there was only remaining the short trip back to Texas, back to the waiting Archer Kinsman with the sort of story he'd hate to tell any father. He almost wished, deep in his heart, that death would beat him to Kinsman's side. That would be the simplest way . . .

A PERSONAL ASIDE

Erle Stanley Gardner is recognized today as one of the great names in this field. But, just as most people think of him only as the creator of Perry Mason, a name that has come close to being part of this country's folklore, and are only sometimes aware of his impressive contributions to the cause of justice and of his long-time interest in the pre-history of Baja California, even Perry Mason aficionados do not realize that, for many years, this man wrote stories, such as the one we bring you this month, which reflected the writer's intense interest in the peoples of the West and the South West, among whom he has made his home for so many years.

And in the peoples, originally from China, who have made their home on the West Coast.

To even casually refer to these as Chinese is of course actually not correct. Even the distinction that is so often made between Cantonese and North Chinese cooking should hint at the reality that many peoples make up the nation we know as China, and that a man from the North could, as Gardner writes, have different loyalties than would those in Nanking or in Canton.

A personal note.

I have never walked the streets of San Francisco's Chinatown. But we had many good friends from China in the old days—men whose roots were in that China which is considerably more ancient than is the ideology of her present-day rulers. These men, scholars, teachers, artists, dreamers if you wish, obviously had no place in the China of Mao.

But I do know something of Chinatown, New York—a community with its own traditions and memories, and with a distinct pride in the contributions of Chinese America to our times.

I remember speaking, one evening, years ago, when we were all fighting the Oriental Exclusion law under which Chinese (and Indians, and others) were barred from citizenship in this country. I would speak for a few minutes and then pause—what I had said would be translated—and then I would continue, facing the four-five hundred disconcertingly silent members of the audience.

For years afterwards I would keep running into people who would obviously remember me from this one meeting. There would be a gleam of recognition in their eyes. And a smile—sometimes . . .

This, to me, is Chinatown. Even the long-memoried Vermonters could learn from these men . . .

H.S.S.

the last samurai

by Joseph Commings

It was early in the summer of 1947. In Tokyo, the legal proceedings of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, or the Major Crimes Court, had been grinding on for almost a year.

The court was sitting, appropriately, in the former War Ministry Building on Ichigaya Hill. All around the perfectly preserved buildings on the hilltop was the widespread wasteland of war-devastated Tokyo. Inside the courtroom two men caused a mild stir behind the defence section as they entered.

The scene of the tribunal never ceased to be impressive. The great sound-proofed hall was guarded by a large body of military police. Eleven black-robed justices, from eleven allied nations, sat on a highly raised bench. Allied flags were draped over their heads. The large staffs of the prosecution and the defence faced each other on either side of the judges. The lighting and sound effects were rigged with a flair for the dramatic. Photographers perched on tall towers. Various languages, translated by a pool of interpreters,

It is sometimes forgotten that there have been men in the Senate of the United States who, in their day, were fully as unpredictable—and determined—as is Senator Brooks U. Banner whose activities have been reported upon from time to time, by veteran novelist Joseph Commings, in this magazine.

poured out through radio earphones. The Japanese war prisoners, sitting in a double row in the high dock, some wearing old uniforms from which all insignia had been stripped, looked out either impassively or dull-eyed.

Everything seemed to be in order on this mild early summer morning— except that one of the seats in the dock was empty.

One prisoner was missing.

One of the men at the back of the defence section was Colonel Walter Seven. He was Provost Marshal. He was a lean, dangerous hawk of a man, with a face as dark as night. Tall and spare, he was cut just the right size for a fighting man, and his thin dark face frequently rippled with humour.

There was no humour showing on his face today. He frowned at the empty seat. "Last night," he said through tight lips, "one of them escaped."

"I know," said the other man with him. "I told him to escape."

The answer was unexpected. Jarred by that surprising bit of news, Seven snapped, "You what?"

Some of the people in the courtroom turned to see what the commotion was about.

Trying to keep his voice down, Seven seized his companion's thick arm. "Come with me, Banner. My office."

"Yass," said Banner. 'We can talk private."

Seven led the way to his office on the second floor of the Defence Wing, Banner loping beside him.

U.S. Senator Brooks U. Banner had a glimmer in his little frosty blue eyes like the bad boy who has just put tadpoles in the lemonade bowl at a PTA meeting. He was big and fat with a sweating red face and a bulbous nose that was lit up like a jack o'lantern. His mane of grizzled hair looked as if it had been combed with an egg-beater. He held his large panama hat in his big speckled hands and the suit he was wearing was cut from enough white Congo cloth to make a circus tent. Sticking out of one jacket pocket was a paperbound manual titled *Conversational Japanese*. Disregarding the No Smoking signs, in five languages, he shoved a Pittsburgh stogie into his belligerent face.

Neither said a word until they were in the office. Seven had plenty to ask him. Was this a rib? Banner was infamous for his practical jokes. Most of them backfired on Banner anyway. Well, nobody was laughing. Seven felt a personal responsibility for every one of those Japanese war criminals. Not one of them was going to get away.

Banner had settled himself in the biggest and softest of the leather chairs. Seven was too impatient to sit. He prowled back and forth.

"Well, Banner?" snapped Seven. "Is it true?"

Banner puffed placidly on his stogie, then scowled at the ragged wet end of it. "It's true, Seven."

Seven stopped prowling for a moment to search his mind back. "Colonel Ohara *did* make a phone call to you earlier this week."

"Two calls," corrected Banner amiably. "During the second one I told him to crack outta this crib. Strictly speaking, *he* wasn't the one who spoke to me on the phone. It was a Japanese gal interpreter."

"Yes," nodded Seven. "Tsuji. From the interpreters' pool. She's been translating for him for a long time." Then he added ominously, "She's disappeared too. Do you know anything about that? Where are they, Banner?"

"Lemme tell you this," said Banner, ignoring Seven's sharp questions. "I flew over here last month to give Mac an assist. We broke up a black market in army blankets. Nothing to do with this case. Today's the first time I set foot inside the tribunal. The first I heard about Colonel Mitsuku Ohara was when his gal Friday buzzed me on Monday. When I finally got the excited jabbering ironed out, I learned why he'd singled me out, Seven. My rep as a defence counsel is known—haaaak!—around the world. It seems that Ohara's life is in danger."

"I'll say it's in danger," said Seven sourly "He's got a date with the hangman."

Banner's ruddy jowls looked grim. "Not yet. The trial ain't over. No, sir, Seven. What Ohara meant was that one of the other prisoners was gonna kill him."

Seven stared. "Which other prisoner?"

"General Yamagata! That prize package who once bragged about being the Scourge of Singapore!"

Seven scoffed. "If those prisoners weren't locked up every night, I'd suspect that Ohara had got hold of some opium. What a pipe dream!"

"Quit yapping! What d'you know about it?"

Seven started to make an angry retort, then decided to let Banner finish. "Go ahead."

"The way I got it relayed to me, it's like this: Yamagata and Ohara and the rest of 'em are charged with a list of atrocities longer'n my arm. The indictment says crimes against peace, crimes against humanity, and murder. Ohaha was Yamagata's aide as they went on a raping rampage through New Guinea. Now you can be sure that there ain't many witnesses left that'll stand up in court and testify against Yamagata. That weakens the case against him. Before they were captured, young Ohara had promised his general that

he would never testify against him. It didn't matter, he thought. He figgered that what we'd demand was Japs in equal numbers for the boys we'd lost. He felt that we wouldn't be particular about which of the the Japs it'd be. And I admit in the beginning we weren't any too particular."

"We're giving them a fair trial," said Seven briefly.

"Of course we are." Banner tapped his grizzled skull with his forefinger. "But you gotta deal with Oriental mentality, chum. It ain't like ours. Ohara swore to Yamagata that he'd never rat on the general. Yamagata had given him a direct order to keep his mouth shut. In the Jap army, disobedience is absolutely impossible. To protect another's fault, whether or not at his own risk, is still considered a noble act. The gods smile on you for it. Remember, Seven, you're dealing with a semi-feudal ethical system."

"All right," admitted Seven. "Ohara was trying to save Yamagata's life at the cost of his own. So why should Yamagata threaten *his* life now?"

"Can't you see, you nitwit? Ohara decided to peach on Yamagata."

"What changed his mind, Banner?"

"I dunno for sure. From what I gathered, that li'l translator is a cutie and she's stuck on Ohara. Anyway, during their lengthy association, she musta convinced him that his thinking was all wrong. It wasn't the American way. So he changed his mind and offered to talk about everything. He appealed to me when he found out that Yamagata would kill him to keep him from testifying to the truth."

Seven shook his head dubiously. "Ohara has an overworked imagination. How could Yamagata kill him? There's an MP sergeant assigned to watch each prisoner day and night. They could never get to one another. What'd you advise him to do?"

"Waal," said Banner, "I told him that if he was skeered he oughta request to be moved elsewhere. He said he'd requested that, but he'd been turned down."

"I heard something like that," said Seven.

"You shoulda looked into it!"

"Nothing like that can happen, I told you, Banner. We maintain maximum security."

"Something happened last night," said Banner, rubbing it in. "Ohara got clean away."

Seven felt himself get red-faced. "And you advised him to do it!!"

"After that first phone call I thought about it. When he called me again the next day, I told him that if they wouldn't change his cell to give him any protection, to get outta Sugamo Prison

entirely. I'd be responsible."

"And I," snapped Seven, "am responsible for getting him back. Do you know where he is?"

Banner didn't answer immediately. He sat chomping on his stogie and glowering out the window. Across the scummy, stagnant moat from the War Ministry stood the Japanese National Shrine of Dead Soldiers. Standing as it did on the abruptly rising front of the hill, the ministry windows looked out over the rubble of a destroyed city. Stubbles of weeds were growing in what once were exquisite ornamental gardens. Tall black chimneys stood up forlornly out of charred debris. An ancient camphor tree close by was a giant black skeleton. Mount Fuji simmered in the distance.

When Banner did reply, he didn't answer Seven's question. I'm curious to know how he got away."

"Don't *you* know all that?"

"Suppose you tell me."

Seven knew that Banner wouldn't budge. "I'll do better than that." He glared at Banner for a minute, then picked up a phone from his glasstop desk and dialed an extension. "Send Sergeant Don White in to me at once."

"Sergeant Don White?" inquired Banner as Seven put down the phone.

"He was the guard that Ohara got away from last night."

They waited.

A minute later the door opened and White entered. He saluted Seven. Brawny and tanned, he wore an army uniform with an MP brassard. He packed an army .45 in a black leather holster on his hip. Grey eyes peered out fathomlessly from under the brim of the white helmet.

Seven nodded at him. He knew thoroughly all the men under his command. White was regular army, a seasoned veteran of the China-India-Burma combat zones. He had a constellation of battle stars on his campaign ribbons and a Purple Heart. He was the kind of fellow, Seven knew, who took pride in other trophies too. At home in Broken Bow, Nebraska, were the high school football loving cups and the friendship pins from the girls he had driven crazy with his dazzling broken field running during the big game. He still got sugar reports from some of those girls at mail call.

"This is Senator Banner," said Seven.

White saluted again.

"Howdy?" said Banner.

"Give the Senator the details of what happened last night, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir." Standing at ease, White spoke in a clipped tone. He hadn't slept much last night, but it didn't show. Letting a

prisoner of this calibre get away from him was a black mark on his clean record. "After the court adjourned, sir, all the prisoners went back to Sugamo Prison in the blacked-out bus. We guard it with a fleet of military police jeeps. The prisoners aren't handcuffed in the bus, sir, but during the forty-minute drive they're not allowed to talk or smoke. At the prison they had chow and then were locked in their cells. They all change to faded blue fatigues at night. The fatigues look like prison uniforms anyway."

Banner interrupted: "Would it be possible for any one of the prisoners, in any way, to get into another prisoner's cell?"

"No, sir. That would be impossible. The cells are widely separated from one another. And there are guards on all the cells as long as the prisoners are in them. We stand a trick of four hours each. We walk back and forth and look in frequently at the prisoner. I had been permanently assigned to Ohara. Last night I went on duty at 20.00 hours. I'd been at my post for about an hour. Everything had been quiet until this time I glanced in his cell. He had been lying on his bunk reading, but now I saw him sprawled on the floor. We're always on the alert for them committing hara-kiri, Senator, so I hollered for Captain Hamilton to bring the keys."

Banner said: "You don't have any cell keys, Sarge?"

"No, sir, none of us guards have. The captain came and unlocked Ohara's cell door and we both went in and looked at him. He seemed to be unconscious. We thought he might have swallowed poison. So we hurriedly called the medical officer. He came, but he couldn't see anything wrong with Ohara. He ordered the prisoner to be taken on a stretcher by a couple of corpsmen to the infirmary. It's a ward with ten beds in it, Senator. Nobody else was sick, so nobody else was in there. They stripped him and put him into one of the beds. The M.O. said he couldn't find any toxic symptoms. It was puzzling."

"Confirmed by the M.O.," said Seven. "Continue, Sergeant."

"I still had a couple of hours to go before I finished my trick. The M.O. told me to stand guard in the infirmary and report when Ohara became conscious. So I took a post in the corridor outside and looked in at frequent intervals. There isn't much more to it, sir. One time I looked in and he was lying flat in bed. The next time I looked in he was gone."

"What'd you do then?" asked Banner.

"I could hardly believe my eyes, sir. To get out he would have had to pass me in the cor-

ridor. There was only one other way—the windows. But they're all barred. Ohara was gone and so were his fatigues. They'd been laid on a bedside chair. He'd been shamming, sir, waiting for his chance to escape."

Seven said: "It was an act, Ohara comes from a long line of Kabuki actors. And he's a *bad* actor."

White continued: "After sounding the alarm I examined the windows and two of the iron bars felt greasy. I checked in the medicine cabinet in the ward and found a jar of vaseline with most of its contents scooped out. Then I knew how he'd done it, sir. He'd smeared his naked body with vaseline and squeezed out through the bars. It's a drop of ten feet to the prison yard. Once outside he could put on the fatigues he'd dropped out the window ahead of him and then scale the wall."

"That's right," said Seven. "The vaseline was used."

"He got out *through* the bars!" Banner sounded incredulous.

"Nips are small, sir," said White. "And he was smaller than average."

A light was glimmering in Banner's little blue eyes. "As small as a gal."

"Have you ever seen Ohara?" said Seven suspiciously.

"No." Banner brought himself back to the subject. "No trace of him in the yard? Any of the outside guards see him?"

"Negative," said Seven. "He flew the coop, all right." He nodded at White. "That's all, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir." White saluted and stepped smartly out.

"We've got White confined to quarters till I finish this investigation." Seven looked severe. "Banner, this won't do Ohara—or you—any good. He's coming back to stand trial like the rest of them. Are you going to tell me where he is?"

"No," said Banner. He was staring at the chewed stogie in his fingers in a perplexed way.

"All I have to do is tell the Court and the judges'll issue a habeas corpus. If you don't produce Ohara forthwith, you'll be held in contempt."

Banner wore a look of injured truculence. "I've been in contempt before, from the Supreme Court on down. You can't do anything, Seven. It's your word against mine. And I'll deny everything I've told you."

"What the hell's wrong?" shouted Seven. "What side are you on?"

"There's a passel of crummy bastards on trial in that courtroom, but we're spending years of time and tens of thousands of dollars to give every last one of 'em a fair shake. And that's what I'm aiming to do. What side are *you* on?"

"I'm impartial." Seven felt his lips skinning back from his teeth. "The only way we're going to give them a fair shake is when they're all present. *All* of them! And you or nobody else is going to stop me from putting Ohara back in there!"

"Bully for you," muttered Banner. He chewed bellicosely on the stogie and glowered back at Seven.

Seven began to grin mirthlessly. "You don't look happy, Banner. I've known you for a long time. I know you as well as anybody. I can almost hear your brain waves sloshing around inside your think-tank. And I can tell when something's wrong. Is this what you really wanted to happen? Or has something you'd planned gone screwy? No, you're not happy at all."

"I am wondering about something," finally admitted Banner. He paused, mumbling, as if asking himself, "Why he escaped *that* way."

Seven had one big fat lead. It was Banner himself. Eventually, Seven was sure, Banner was going to make contact with his escaped protege and when he did Seven was going to be right behind him.

Shadowing, Seven followed Banner through Tokyo. Parts of the great sprawling city were being rebuilt. The majority of people still huddled in the ramshackle ruins left by the fires started by the incendiaries dropped by squadrons of B-29's. Streets were a nightmare maze among shacks built from war scraps. Human wreckage holed up in shells of shattered buildings, in underground passageways, under bridges, in temple halls, and in the subways.

Demobilized Japanese soldiers thronged the streets in dismantled army uniforms and air pilots' leather coats. In spite of the warm weather, Seven saw Manchurian fur caps and Mongolian sheepskin coats and women in the ugly padded *mompe* pants. Wearing a complete wardrobe kept it safer from thieves.

Banner strolled ahead with a grandiose air. People got out of his way on the Ginza. Even the tough, street-walking pan-pan girls avoided him. He looked like a waltzing grizzly bear.

Sunset made a silhouette of a large *torii*-gate. Banner's shambling white form faded on under the crossbar. Seven followed at what he thought was a safe distance.

They were in a Zen temple garden. The ginko trees cast weird shadows. The sand underfoot was raked into mystic ripple patterns every day by a Buddhist monk. This place was outside the city and secretive, and Seven thought it would be ideal for a meeting between Banner and Ohara.

Threading among small boulders and stone lanterns, Seven cautiously approached the darkened temple. A gabled roof of copper and gold tiles loomed in the sunset glow. Gold wind-bells hanging from the corners of the eaves tinkled in a breath of breeze. Seven stopped, startled. The whole of the cornice under the eaves was writhing with a race of white dragons with gilded wires stuck in their jaws for whiskers.

The only sound now was the tinkling of the wind-bells and the rustle of dragon whiskers. Banner had disappeared into the temple.

Shadows moved there. Tightening his jaw, Seven stepped briskly forward.

A huge form shuffled to meet him, looking like a gigántic baby, wearing only a small diaper, and for a moment, in this uncertain light, Seven thought that Banner was coming at him stripped.

Then Seven recognized the ponderous professional waddle and saw the sumo topknot.

Banner now came out of the temple doorway and ambled over to one of the stunted stone lanterns and sat down on it leisurely. "Sorry I have to do this, sonny boy," he said. "Only I gotta stop you from follering me."

Seven was keeping his eyes on the huge sumo wrestler. "I'll bet you're sorry," he retorted. "You're gloating like Hitler at the Sportplatz."

"This feller's a *yokozuna,* a grand champ," advised Banner. "You still got a chance. You can cut 'n' run."

"Cut and run, hell!" flung back Seven.

Munching the stogie, Banner motioned the sumo forward. "Go!"

The sumo had been squatting on his heels, nimbly for his elephantine size. He bowed towards Banner and clapped his hands. "*Hai! Hai! Hai!*" he shouted hoarsely. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

They crouched, knuckles in the sand, facing each other. The sumo was about six feet four, making him a couple of inches taller than Seven. He was over three hundred pounds, outweighing Seven's one-ninety like a hogshead. A sumo performance was making grinning faces and lunging and grappling and throwing. Seven had to keep out of the reach of those club-like arms.

Seven was a professional fighting man. War was his specialty. Problems could often be solved by words and treaties, but there was no way like relaxing the tensions than by the fierce physical joy of strong bodies smashing together in open combat.

The sumo suddenly launched forward from his squat like greased lightning, his lowered head like a battering ram. Seven

tried to leap aside. The sumo's forehead smacked loudly against Seven's right shoulder. Spinning, Seven was flung roughly across the garden.

He fell with his chin tucked in and his body loose and relaxed. He rolled in the sand like a cat and bounded to his feet.

Grinning and waddling, the sumo hitched up his heavy leather belt and silken loincloth. His enormous belly sagged over the belt. He advanced, grimacing, with a mimic stamping of his bare horny feet, bringing them down on the earth with such a thud that the temple bells tinkled louder. His great breasts were as pendulous as a woman's and they shimmied. His belly, filled with steaks and noodles, joggled. Locking with him would be like trying to throw a bull rhino.

Seven acted braver than he felt. "Come on, you ox! Afraid?"

He heard Banner give a groan in sympathy. "Who'll I send the flowers to, Seven?"

Seven didn't answer. He saved his wind. One way or the other, this bout was going to be short.

The sumo lunged with outstretched arms. Seven bobbed, ducking under the arms, smashing a sledgehammer punch into the bloated midsection as he dodged past. His arm rebounded as if he had driven it into a bale of India rubber and it went numb to the elbow.

The fat belly jigged as the sumo turned with a growl that was either pain or rage. Seven skipped away from the lumbering pursuit, sidestepping around the outside of a tiny wood-and-paper pavilion.

Seven's shoes skidded in the sand. The sumo reached for him. Seven righted himself quickly and sent a paralysing judo chop into the side of the sumo's thick neck, a blow that would have felled a horse.

The sumo only shook his head and reeled. He was scatter-eyed, but still as full of fight as a wounded cape buffalo.

Both arms grappling for Seven, he almost fell forward in his desire to mangle.

Seven stepped in close, grabbing one sweating forearm and the silken loincloth, pivoted, and let the avalanche of flesh roll over his hip. He felt as if he were under the drive wheel of a locomotive as every sinew and joint in his body creaked from the prodigious strain.

The naked giant turned a cartwheel in the air and sailed into the flimsy pavilion with a ponderous crash He took one wooden wall in with him, smashing it to kindling, and then the rest folded down like a Murphy bed, and the streaming paper fluttered around him like wallpaper in a haunted house.

The way he fought, when he was down he was out. And he

stayed out.

Seven eased his own backbone up. His whole spine cracked like nervous knuckles. He glanced around and up. Banner had shown discretion and had fled. Above, under the eaves, Seven was sure that one of the wire-whiskered dragons was grinning with amusement.

Seven plodded out of the temple garden. The monks would have a mess to clean up tomorrow.

Banner could no more cover up his trail than could a hippo running through an acre of cottage cheese. Everybody who had seen Banner could point out to Seven which way he had gone.

Off the Tokaido Highway, where many a samurai sword clashed in the days of the feudal lords, was the Inn of the Heavenly Wish. Locusts were shrilling all about in the pines and cedars. Seven went up the steps to the verandah. He grinned mirthlessly at the large size of a pair of rope-soled deck shoes in the doorway. He kicked off his own brown oxfords and entered.

Banner, garbed in a capacious black kimono, was standing in a guest room staring meditatively and a single blossom in a small into a shrine-like alcove containing a scroll painting on the wall artistic vase. He turned his head towards Seven and looked truculent. "So you had to take him with judo!"

"We all learn it," said Seven grimly.

"I can't seem to get rid of you. Hang around. See if I care. Whether you're with me or not, I'm gonna get to the bottom of this."

Out through a sliding wall-panel came three geisha girls with peach-part hairdos and gaudy kimonos and chalk-white faces. One of them was strumming a samisen and they were singing a famous song, "Gion Kouta," in their high treble voices.

Banner beamed at the girls for a moment, then he said to Seven: "Waal, start taking your clothes off."

"What for?" asked Seven nervously.

"That donnybrook musta left you a li'l bruised." He waved his arm around expansively. "Before we eat, we're all gonna take a nice hot bath."

"With *them*?"

"Wassamatter?" Scowled Banner. "Nekkid gals shouldn't be any novelty to you."

"No, but I usually don't make a Roman orgy of it."

"For a sojer," scoffed Banner, "you sometimes act mighty prissy. Lemme tell you something. One night in a Washington hotel suite I was starting to get dressed to deliver an important speech at a banquet, when a gal reporter comes busting in unannounced for an inter-

view. She took one look at me, tried to keep her eyes from popping outta her head, let out a shriek you coulda heard in Hoboken and then skedaddled for the door, showing her high heels all the way."

Seven nodded. "I suppose you were as naked as a peeled egg."

"Not entirely, Seven. I had my hat on and a seegar in my mouth. What I'm trying to say is that these gals are more democratic about sex." He winked at the geishas and they all tittered. "Come on. The hot water's waiting."

By the time Seven had taken his preliminary scrubbing off and had got into what was like a low, family-size tank full of boiling water, he had got over his first shyness. It was like joining a nudist colony. Once you got up enough nerve to step out into the open, you were one of them.

Banner went in ahead of him like a frolicking whale. "And here they come!!" he sputtered gleefully.

The three girls walked to the edge of the tank in all the glory of their nude sandalwood-coloured skins.

Banner, stopping his frolicking, as boiled red as a lobster, was staring at them in disbelief. "Whaddya know about that! They're all gals!"

Seven wondered if Banner had flipped his lid. "Of course they're girls." He was openly admiring each one of them.

Banner sank into the hot water. "What a disappointment this is!"

"Disappointment? Have you gone balmy?"

Banner stood up and shook himself like a dermal earthquake. "You can stay and soak your head. I'm gonna get dressed."

When Seven returned from the bathing tank he found Banner in the guest room sitting Buddha-like in his black kimono on straw matting in front of a table not more than six inches from the floor. A little maid was serving *sake* in eggshell porcelain cups.

Banner tasted it. "I'd trade this stuff off for Napoleon brandy any time."

"I have a bottle in my ditty bag at the hotel, Banner."

"Later then. Sitdown, Seven. Help yourself. There's seaweed and broiled eels and octopus. Me, I'm gonna have the globefish. It's a great delicacy, only every so often one turns up that's deadly poison."

Seven sat down cross-legged on the floor too. "Why do you eat it?"

"It's like playing Russian roulette, Japanese style." Manipulating his chopsticks, he pecked into his bowl. "I wanna level with you, Seven. Something's gone wrong. You mentioned Ohara's association with the Kabuki theatre. D'you know what *onnagata* means?"

"Should I?" said Seven.

Before Banner could answer, a wall partition slid back noiselessly and a small female figure came into the room, running in white socks with little muffled steps, falling on her knees, putting both hands on the floor, and bowing her flower-decked head. Then she ran forward again and in a moment was sitting with her knees in front of her next to Banner at the table. "*Komban wa, Banner-san!*"

"*Komban wa,*" repeated Banner. "Good evening."

Seven stared at her. She was the most exquisite thing he had seen in Japan. Her kimono, gorgeous with great splashes of flowers, had long trailing sleeves. At her small waist was tied a huge butterfly sash, or *obi.* Her gleaming bee-black hair, parted in the centre, was ornamented with artificial camellias. Her face was a classic oval, what the Japanese fondly call a melon-seed face, and shyly her black almond eyes stole up to peep at the two men.

Banner had continued addressing her in some sort of whacky gibberish. Strangely enough, she understood and answered him.

Banner scowled at Seven. "This's Tsuji. She's the gal who's been Ohara's interpreter for about a year. She's the one I talked to on the phone when he called me."

"So hoppee to meet you, prease," she smiled at Seven.

Seven knew who she was, but he had never seen her looking like this. He couldn't take his eyes away from her. Her softly sibilant voice fascinated him. She kneeled looking down at the polished floor, her head bent so that the long silk-smooth honey-coloured nape of her neck showed. The back of a girl's neck, the only portion of her anatomy really showing in a kimono, carefully made up, was to the Japanese a great attraction and stimulating to sex. Looking at Tsuji, Seven could understand why.

She had a grave smile, full of sweet sadness, like weeping willows, like lovers meeting in the rain, like Cho-Cho-san.

"You look beautiful," said Seven.

"No, sank you," she smiled modestly. "I borrow this Number One kimono from a friend-o. I dress up for to meet my darling. He tell me how muchee he rove me. Yiss?"

"Yass." Banner ate his globefish. "After that first phone call from Ohara, I researched his history, military and civilian. You yourself, Seven, told me that Ohara came from a long line of Kabuki actors. Didja know they were all *Onnagata?*"

"Ah, so!"

Seven saw Tsuji lift her head a trifle at the sound of the word.

"Explain," said Seven.

"Female impersonators. Before

the war, Ohara was considered one of the best. There were few women in Japan who could act as femininely on the stage as he could."

"I remember now", said Seven. "In Kabuki they don't use actresses. All the women parts are played by men. As in the days of the Elizabethan theatre."

"Right. In this country, Seven, there's no imputation against an actor who plays female roles. And the longer he plays that type of part, the better known he becomes. They think it's only possible for a female impersonator to be at his best after a lifetime of experience in portraying young women. Another actor, Baigyoku, was famous for that. He gave a farewell appearance playing the part of a nineteen-year-old gal when he himself was over seventy-three. Their voices are trained from childhood and they learn all the graces and allurements of the females. They talk in thin falsetto voices, wear thick white paint on their faces, like paper masks, and walk with snake hips." Banner leered around. "Like those three geishas."

"All right, Banner," said Seven. "Ohara was an *onnagata*. What's that got to do with us?"

"Don'cha ketch on, dammit?" said Banner. "That was the way I wanted him to escape from Sugamo Prison."

Seven's brows raised. "Dressed as a woman?"

"Why not? Who could do it better? Tsuji agreed. She's the one who talked him outta that notion of trying to protect his superior officer by keeping his mouth shut. As his translator, Tsuji could visit him nearly any time. I suggested that she wear an extra kimono under her own. At the opportune moment, she could slip him the extra kimono and some cosmetics. Once in that get-up he could walk outta the prison with the other gals."

Seven was astonished. "Did you really think he could get away—?"

"Yass, I do!" thundered Banner. "Slicker'n a whistle! Only, for the luvva Mike, that ain't the point. The point is that he greased his body with vaseline and went out the infirmary window instead. Now the blazing question comes up again, Why'd he escape *that* way?"

"I'll be blamed if I know, said Seven. "Does it matter which way he escaped?"

"It means everything. Ohara was gonna meet me and Tsuji here tonight. I know you suspected that much, Seven. That's why you follered me. Now I got a feeling he ain't gonna show up."

"Why not?" asked Seven.

"If he don't show up, he's dead."

Tsuji looked up, her almond eyes shining. "*Dozo, Banner-san.*

Prease. My rover is coming. He forrow me here."

Banner's furry black eyebrows wriggled. "He foller you?"

"Yiss, Banner-san. There he is now."

"Whuzzat?" snapped Banner.

She was pointing at the wall with a delicate forefinger.

Seven twisted his head. On the thin screenlike rice paper wall was the shadow of a man. He had a military bearing and he seemed to be dressed in uniform. His silhouette moved restlessly.

Banner was scrambling to his feet. "Does he know we're here. lotus blossom?"

"No, Banner-san," she said.

"Go out and talk to him. Only don't tell him about us."

"Not hoppee to leave side of illustrious Banner-san."

"Go on!" barked Banner.

Tsuji rose from her knees and scurried in her white socks to the partition. It slid back and she was gone.

Seven was standing, preparing himself. "Now we've got him." he said.

Banner growled. "We have."

Stooping under the paper lanterns, Banner led the way to the wall. The shadows of man and girl had melted together on the other side. Melancholy, thought Seven, the last lovers' meeting. Banner got his thick fingers in the partition and slid it back a crack.

Seven now heard the voices of the two on the other side.

"He didn't come here, did he?" asked the man.

"No, my darring. Verree sorree."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about, Tsuji. He's gone now. Why waste time thinking about something like him. If he hadn't got away, they'd have hanged him in another couple of months."

"Ah, so," murmured Tsuji.

"I thought you had fallen for him."

"I wanted to do somesing for him and—a—"

"You're going to be *my* girl. When I go back to the States, after this's all over, you're going back with me."

Banner said to Seven over the large black hump of his shoulder: "Y'know who that is, don'tcha?"

"Of course."

"I'm gonna ask him some questions."

"About what he's doing with a pretty girl? That's normal military behaviour. I'd like being with her myself."

"About," insisted Banner blackly, "what he did with Ohara's dead body."

Banner bounded up and went through the flung open partition in a banzai charge. Feeling uncertain, Seven stumbled after him. He saw the startled faces of the embracing man and girl.

Sergeant Don White, with his white MP helmet off, had a GI

haircut that looked like mouse fur. At the sight of Banner and Seven, tumbling down on him, the hair started to crawl on his scalp.

He shouted that he was innocent until they found the 200,000 yen, in large denominations, in his footlocker. He couldn't explain satisfactorily how he had come into possession of it. Banner suggested that it was a payoff, a bribe, blood money. Led by Banner, the Army searched the infirmary. In the basement was a laundry plant with a chute coming down from the floors above.

A narrow door opened off the laundry room into a small tunnel that ran from the boiler room. The tunnel served as a conduit for hot water pipes. In the tunnel they found a skeleton with the flesh shredded away from it. The rats in Tokyo were as starved as anybody else.

Finally Sergeant White made a statement. General Yamagata had wanted Ohara eliminated and promised anybody 200,000 yen for the job. Yamagata had partisans outside the prison who could put this money into the assassin's willing hands. However, if Ohara's body were to be found inside the prison, it would be suspected that he was murdered. It should be made to look as if Ohara had escaped. Then the authorities would look elsewhere than the prison for him.

White, on guard outside Ohara's cell, couldn't get in to him. But he could reach his arm in. Getting Ohara to approach near the bars, White dealt him a paralysing judo blow.

Banner, at this point, grinned. "You told me, Seven, after you'd flattened the sumo wrestler, that you are *all* taught judo. That meant White too."

White had knocked Ohara unconscious, then called the captain with the keyes. Ohara was taken out of the cell and put in the infirmary, still out cold. White, on guard outside the ward, waited his chance to slip back inside, strangle Ohara, dump his body down the laundry chute as if Ohara had squeezed out that way, then go down into the laundry plant and drag Ohara's body into the conduit tunnel.

Aside from the money, White said he had always wanted to do it. He hated all their guts.

White shouted hoarsely: "Can *you* forget Bataan? Or Guadalcanal? Or Bougainville?"

And he had the gratification of taking Ohara's pretty girl friend away from him.

Poor Butterfly, thought Seven. *Sayonara.*

"Waal," said Banner, after hearing White's confession, "you didn't get your POW back, but you can have yourself a whopping good court martial."

"I will," promised Seven.

the bargain hunter

by Leo P. Kelley

SALLY HAD taken an early morning train from the suburbs and had arrived in Grand Central Station at 7:02. She had indulged herself and taken a taxi downtown.

Now she stood fidgeting outside the department store beneath the red and blue banners which screamed:

PRICES SLASHED!
MAMMOTH SALE –
ONE DAY ONLY!

She was the third person in the rapidly lengthening line of customers outside the store. The doors opened promptly at 9:30 and the chattering women, armed with shopping bags and charge plates, surged into the store and scurried down the aisles like a multicolored menagerie.

Sally elbowed her way through the mob, heading for the appliance department. She pounced on the gleaming display of electric blenders selling at one half off. A few minutes later, as she raced for the basement, she was nearly sent sprawling by an enthusiastic matron but she countered effectively with a jab from her umbrella.

Leo P. Kelley, who makes a first appearance in this magazine with this story of a much too practical woman, reports that he has been in the Merchant Marine — "Esso tankers to be precise" — and a puppeteer in touring companies and TV. He is the author of several stories published in SF magazines.

By eleven o'clock she had bought the electric blender, two house dresses, a rather stylish imitation pigskin wallet and a dozen towels. Clutching her shopping bag in one hand and her pocketbook in the other, she battled her way to the second floor.

Behind the counter of Hat Heaven a harried clerk was struggling in vain to right a sign which announced: SPECIAL — YOUR CHOICE — $1.01! Sally tried on a rakish blue number but concluded it just wasn't quite *her*. Before she could replace the hat on the counter, it was snatched from her hand by a wild - eyed woman wearing slacks. Sally, undaunted, seized a handful of hats and fought her way to a wall mirror. She tried on one, then a second and finally a third. After some deliberation she selected the first one.

At last, her mission successfully completed, Sally left the store and went out into the early spring sunshine spilling onto the street. Quite satisfied with herself, she stuffed her no longer needed umbrella into her bulging shopping bag and strolled along in search of a suitable place for lunch.

Two blocks away she discovered a sedate little tea room. She entered, found a table and ordered tuna on toast and tea after which she went to the ladies' room where she quickly repaired her damaged makeup and pulled a comb through her disarrayed hair.

Soon after she returned to her table, the waitress brought her order. She ate slowly, thoughtfully, glancing now and then at her watch. She had decided to call the man Anne Martin had recommended at precisely one o'clock.

After finishing her lunch and paying her check, Sally left the tea room and walked up Sixth Avenue to a little park where she sat down with a sigh. While she waited, women walked poodles past her, pigeons eyed her quizzically and men on nearby benches nodded sleepily in the warm sunstream.

One o'clock arrived and it found Sally in a corner drugstore dialing the man's number. Actually it was not his number, but the number of a bar where he received calls of the kind Sally was now nervously making.

A rough male voice answered. "Crown Cafe. Max speaking."

"Is Mr. ——?" Sally glanced quickly at the scrap of paper she held in her hand, the one Anne Martin had given her. "May I speak to Mr. Bradford, please?" she asked hesitantly.

"Hey, Brad," shouted the rough male voice. "For you."

Sally felt her heart hammering.

"H'lo," muttered a husky voice after a pause of several seconds during which Sally sat rigid,

steeling herself.

"Mr. Bradford?"

"Yea." Although suspicion softened the voice, curosity quickened it.

"My name is Sally Benedict," Sally said. "Mrs. Robert Benedict. I'm a good friend of Mrs. Anne Martin." She waited hopefully.

At first there was only a discouraging silence on the other end of the line. Then, "Oh, yea. Mrs. Martin. How's she doing these days?"

"Fine, just fine." Sally took the plunge. "She makes a lovely widow. Black becomes her so."

Mr. Bradford gave a throaty chuckle. "What can I do for you, Sally?"

Sally winced at the use of her given name by a man like Mr. Bradford. "My husband—. That is, Bob—." She was going about it badly, she realized.

"Yea," prodded Mr. Bradford, "your husband. What a b o u t him?"

Sally took a deep breath and said, "I want you to kill him."

"I guess," said Mr. Bradford, "that Mrs. Martin must've been satisfied with my work."

"She recommended you very highly," said Sally hastily.

"Five grand," snarled Mr. Bradford.

Sally suddenly felt much better; this was something she understood. "One thousand," she snapped promptly.

"Uh, uh, Sally. I'd starve!" Mr. Bradford exclaimed emphatically.

"I could consult one of your competitors," Sally said slyly.

A long pause greeted this thrust. Sally relaxed, smiling at her reflection in the glass wall of the telephone booth, convinced her bluff would work. She knew none of Mr. Bradford's competitors. "Mr. Bradford," she inquired, "are you still there?"

"I'm here. Thirty five hundred."

"Two thousand! I have a friend here in the city, a girl I went to school with, who would be only too happy to hire you, Mr. Bradford. That is, of course, *if* I recommend you and I will if the price is right."

Mr. Bradford groaned. "Okay. So okay! Two thousand. I want half now, the rest—afterward. In cash."

They made the arrangements. Sally would withdraw the money from the bank in small bills. She would send it by bonded messenger to Mr. Bradford in care of the Crown Cafe. With it she would send her house key.

"You'll be sure to do it tonight?" Sally inquired anxiously. "I just can't stand another minute of him and that—that *woman!*" she exclaimed angrily. "Why he even brings that Aileen Cummings to my home whenever I'm away! I could kill her! But then that's more in your line, isn't it,

Mr. Bradford?" she added primly.

"You got yourself an alibi for tonight?" inquired Mr. Bradford professionally.

"I've told Bob I was spending the night with Anne Martin," Sally replied confidently. 'She promised to be my alibi. First though, I'll come into town and meet you for the final payoff. That *is* what it's called, isn't it?" asked Sally, suppressing a giggle. "Afterward," she continued, "I'll take the train back and go to Anne's house."

"Make it midnight, here at the Crown," Mr. Bradford instructed her. "That'll give me time to get out to your place and—and back. And Sally. Be here!"

He gave Sally the address of the Crown Cafe. Sally jotted it down and gave him her address. "See you at the Crown," she said gaily. She hung up the phone and left the booth humming a tune from *My Fair Lady.*

She stopped at the bank and, a few minutes later, at the office of the messenger service. All the way home on the train she exulted, already feeling like a new woman—a free woman.

Arriving home, Sally slipped out of her clothes and flopped on the bed, tired but contented.

Waking just after eight, she put on her housecoat and went into the bathroom. She sang as she showered.

A few minutes later, in the living room, she wrote a note for Bob:

Darling,

I've gone to stay overnight with Anne. There's a TV dinner in the freezer. See you in the morning.

Sally

She carried the note into the bedroom and stuck it in a corner of the mirror. As she did so, Bob Benedict stumbled through the front door even drunker than usual. Sally heard him pouring himself a drink and as he weaved his way into the bedroom she noted that his glass held nearly four fingers of bourbon. He grunted a greeting. Sally replied with a shrug.

"Gonna hit the hay," he mumbled after emptying his glass.

"Do that," Sally mouthed silently as he collapsed on the bed.

The sight of her husband's slack jaw and balding head made her sick. I should have married a younger man, she thought, but then they are usually so poor. She picked up her clothes and carried them to the bathroom.

As she brushed her coppery head in front of the mirror, his snores erupted in the bedroom. Sally made a moue of distaste and continued calmly brushing her luxurious hair.

Bob moaned aloud in his sleep. "Aileen! Ooohhh, baby!"

"Oh, shut up!" Sally screeched. She furiously slammed the bathroom door and stared in dismay as the door knob fell to the tile floor with a brittle *clack.*

She had bought the rather old-fashioned unit at the local hardware store several days ago, she recalled, her hands fluttering up to cover her mouth. It had been priced at $1.98 but she had pointed out to the clerk that it was warped and he had sold it to her for half a dollar. She had fastened it to the door herself.

Sally fumbled nervously with the door. She tried prying it open with a nail file taken from the medicine cabinet but the nail file snapped. The door remained closed.

"Bob," she cried. "Help me!

Faintly through the door, Sally heard the sound of his snores rising and falling regularly, rhythmically.

Chris Bradford strode jauntily into the Crown Cafe at ten minutes before midnight.

"Hi, Max," he hailed the bartender, glancing up and down the length of the bar. "Anybody been asking for me?" He winked.

Max shook his head as Bradford seated himself at the bar next to Eddie Simpson, an occasional competitor, and ordered a beer.

"How's business? asked Eddie idly.

"Booming," replied Bradford happily.

At twenty minutes to one, Bradford snarled into his fourth beer, "If she don't show—!"

"Tell old Eddie about it buddy boy. I got me a strong pair of shoulders."

"—and she said she had this friend, see," Bradford explained. "Sally said maybe she's recommend me to the friend.

"Well, when I got there I spotted her farewell note stuck in the mirror. The guy was dead to the world. But all of a sudden he wakes up and yells 'Aileen!'

" 'Bobbie,' she hollers back from the bathroom. 'I'm in here!'

"Like I said, my client was big for a bargain and she was going to recommend me to her friend so I figured I'd make sure she did. I figured I'd give her more than she bargained for. I hit the mark first. Then I kicked in the bathroom door and did for hubby's play-pretty before she could open that cute mouth of hers.

"Two for the price of one, you know? So believe me, if that doll don't show—!"

(Continued from other side)

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